Agrarian Questions

The Latin American Novel on the Road to Capitalism

Ericka Beckman

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VERSO
London • New York

First published by Verso 2026
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The manufacturer's authorized representative in the EU for product safety (GPSR) is LOGOS EUROPE, 9 rue Nicolas Poussin, 17000, La Rochelle, France
Contact@logoseurope.eu

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Verso
UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
US: 207 East 32nd Street, New York, NY 10016
versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-8367-4339-2
ISBN-13: 978-1-8367-4341-5 (US EBK)
ISBN-13: 978-1-8367-4340-8 (UK EBK)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Beckman, Ericka (Associate professor) author
Title: Agrarian questions: the Latin American novel on the road to capitalism / Ericka Beckman.
Description: London; New York: Verso, 2026. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2026009827 (print) | LCCN 2026009828 (ebook) | ISBN 9781836743392 paperback | ISBN 9781836743415 ebook
Subjects: LCSH: Latin American fiction--History and criticism | Capitalism in literature | Agriculture in literature | LCGFT: Literary criticism
Classification: LCC PQ7082.N7 B354 2026 (print) | LCC PQ7082.N7 (ebook)
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2026009827
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2026009828

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Acknowledgments

I have incurred many debts while writing this book. Over the course of several years, comrades in the Marxist Literary Group provided the intellectual sustenance I needed to develop its main ideas. Special thanks go to Bret Benjamin, Beverley Best, Nicholas Brown, Kanishka Chowdhury, Anna Einarsdóttir, Barbara Foley, Neil Larsen, Tom Laughlin, Colleen Lye, Courtney Maloney, Tavid Mulder, Oded Nir, Paul Stasi, and Emilio Sauri. Equal thanks go to my rad transatlantic writing group, composed of Molly Geidel, Christine Okoth, and Myka Tucker-Abramson; their smart questions and unflagging encouragement made it possible to write—and finish. Students in graduate seminars at the University of Pennsylvania helped me hash out readings and arguments. The School of Arts and Sciences at Penn granted me precious leave time for research and writing; my colleagues in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese offered steady institutional and intellectual support.

Pavel Andrade, Neil Larsen, Joshua Lund, and Michael Niblett gave me generous feedback on the manuscript. One of the origins of this project lies in a conversation about Chilean land reform with my co-conspirator Marcial Godoy-Anativia, who has enabled me at every stage of writing. I am indebted to Emilio Sauri for encouraging me to frame this book around literary perspective, and for his perceptive comments on the final product. Any remaining shortcomings, are, of course, my own. Rika Chandra, Peter Elmore, Sharae Deckard, Neil Lazarus, and Ignacio Sánchez Prado

provided all kinds of references. Alexander Regier always lent an ear when needed. Maria Gillombardo, Craig Koslofsky, and Carol Symes helped me get ideas off the ground at the very start of this project. This book was improved by questions and feedback from audiences at talks given at Duke, FLACSO-Quito, Northwestern, Notre Dame, Penn State, Princeton, Stanford, Warwick, Yale, and at the Universities of British Columbia, California-Davis, Chicago, Colorado, Estadual de Campinas, Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Michigan, Pontificia Católica de Lima, and Toronto.

At Verso, I could not have dreamed of a better editor than Nicole Aschoff, whose keen editorial eye—and multiple readings of the manuscript—have made this a much better book. Thanks to Sebastian Budgen for shepherding the book in key moments. I am also grateful to Steven Hiatt and Nick Walther for their support during the production process.

Finally, this book has benefited in incalculable ways from the intelligence, wit, and good humor of Marcelo Bucheli and Camila Bucheli-Beckman. For this, and for making just about everything better, I dedicate this book to them.

An early version of chapter 4 appeared in *Modernism/modernity* 23, no. 4 (November 2016). A version of the second half of chapter 2 appeared in *Mexican Literature in Theory*, edited by Ignacio Sánchez Prado (Bloomsbury, 2018). A version of the second half of chapter 3 appeared in *Mediations* (Fall 2019/Spring 2020). Some lines from the introduction and chapter 5 previously appeared in *e-misférica* 14, no. 1 (2018). Some lines from chapter 5 and the coda previously appeared in *After Marx: Literature, Theory and Value in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Colleen Lye and Christopher Nealon (Cambridge, 2022).

Introduction: Agrarian Questions, Novel Answers

To Begin “from the Beginning”

José María Arguedas’s posthumously published novel *The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below* (1971) includes a memorable scene in which the manager of a fish processing plant in the Peruvian port city of Chimbote takes a visitor on a tour of the facility. Pointing to a set of machines used for crushing anchovies into fish meal, the manager proclaims with great ceremony: “Let’s begin from the beginning … those five cyclones are run by a single *cholo*.”[1] In Peruvian Spanish, the term *cholo* is a derogatory term for an acculturated indigenous person. In Arguedas’s novel, it refers to the tens of thousands of Quechua-speaking migrants who have traveled from rural Andean villages to the coastal city, seeking work in its factories. In this sense, the manager’s claim that he is beginning “from the beginning” is entirely misleading, for it is only from the perspective of capital that we might posit an encounter between a lone worker and a machine as the beginning of anything. As Karl Marx noted, the story of how people with previous access to subsistence and community came to be workers possessing “nothing to sell except their own skins” was a long and vicious one. Only the “nursery tales” told by political economy posit it as a simple origin story.[2] In Arguedas’s novel, the factory manager’s

earnest proclamation that he is starting from the beginning thus raises a host of questions: How did the single, atomized cholo worker come to meet the five machines he operates? Zooming out of the fish-meal factory, how did the thousands of unemployed and underemployed migrant workers that fill the pages of the novel arrive in the sprawling slums surrounding the port city? Bringing these questions closer to our own present, how did the surplus army eking out a living in what Mike Davis has termed a "planet of slums" come to occupy this position?[3] Who are the main characters in this movement, and what are its various moments of emergence?

Today, at a moment when most people on the planet have become proletarians—a category increasingly defined by swelling proportions of under-/precariously employed workers—it becomes easy to proclaim, like the factory manager in Arguedas's novel, that the relation between capital and labor constitutes the starting point or even endpoint of social existence. Even when we are aware that capitalist social relations have not always existed, their longer histories are often invisible from the vantage point of the present. This is true even, or perhaps especially, in regions of the world where the history of proletarianization has been both relatively recent and dramatically rapid. Take, for example, the case of Latin America. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the preponderance of the population, up to 80 percent in some areas, labored in the countryside, in contexts ranging from large estates and independent smallholdings to indigenous agrarian communities. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, Latin America had become, according to United Nations statistics, the most urban region on the planet, a transition that, beyond marking a geographical shift, signals a world-historic moment of proletarianization.[4]

This transition was and remains epoch-making: As Eric Hobsbawm has noted more generally, "The most dramatic and far-reaching social change of the second half of the twentieth century, and the one that cuts us off forever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry."[5] While peasantries across different zones of Europe had begun to wane in the nineteenth century, with varying degrees of intensity, this process became global only during the second half of the twentieth, as wide swathes of what was then called the Third World experienced unprecedented waves of depeasantization.[6] Such claims, to be sure, leave room for qualification: Peasantries remain quite sizable in many parts of South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, and peasant and indigenous movements remain politically

salient even where numbers have dwindled, as in the case of the Zapatistas in Chiapas or the Landless Movement in Brazil. Even so, it is undeniable that key transitions have taken place, resulting in a planet largely composed of people who encounter capital as part of a disposable workforce. And yet for all its world-making significance, the precise contours of this transition remain murky and unclear, encouraging us, like the factory manager in Arguedas's novel, to "begin" from the perspective of what stands in front of us (machines, cities, slums, informal market stalls, but also employment figures, inflation statistics, rates of foreign investment), rather than the longer historical processes that ushered the present into being.

Yet if one looks closely, glimpses of a longer history can be gleaned to recover a sense of movement with respect to the past. As I examine throughout this book, one of the key modes for making this history visible was the twentieth-century Latin American novel, which, perhaps more than any other representational form, sought to evoke epochal transitions from the countryside to the city, hacienda to slum, and peasant plot to factory floor. To return briefly to Arguedas's novel, the factory manager's claim to begin from the beginning is revealed as a ruse when we learn that he is in fact a mythical millenarian fox who has assumed human form. Together with his interlocutor, another mythical fox, he spins, bops, and sings his way through the factory to reveal a much longer history standing behind the encounter between a lone worker and five machines. The empty present of the factory stands in tension with a still-visible communal agrarian past. But the novel's purchase on history comes into even sharper focus when we consider that Arguedas's earlier novels had attempted to understand unprecedented historical upheaval in the Peruvian Andes. Between the 1930s and 1960s, he authored a series of works that mapped, on an epic scale, the crumbling of the estate system that had dominated indigenous people since the colonial period, the incursion of national commodity markets and imperial mining interests, and, concomitantly, the coalescing of indigenous movements for liberation from these forces. Today, for reasons explored below, Arguedas's novels are most often approached as an attempt to preserve indigenous culture and "tradition." But as this author's own pronouncements make clear, his commitment to the novel form was driven by the need to examine unprecedented *change*. Highland indigenous people, he wrote in 1950, were faced with powerful though often imperceptible historical currents that were forcing them "to make a constant effort to

accommodate, to readjust to a permanent drama." The resulting drama—which Arguedas understood as driven by capitalism and imperialism, though its effects were not reducible to the economic realm—was in turn giving birth to countless new characters, "from the unstable mestizo who has barely emerged from the Indian mass to the revolutionary militant" alongside newfangled landowners, students, and urban migrants. He continues: "These characters are myriad, *and their different souls can only be defined through the novel*."[7] And though Arguedas's attempts to define these "souls" were unique, he was not alone in his commitment to the novel as a means of bringing epochal agrarian transitions into view. To paraphrase Arguedas, it was only the twentieth-century novel—and more specifically, the form I identify in this book as the agrarian novel—that could define transitions that today have mostly receded from view, but whose consequences remain very much with us.

Agrarian Novels, Agrarian Questions

While the perspective offered by capital proposes we begin—and end—with the de facto transformation of humanity into a labor force it may dispose of at will, this book proposes the twentieth-century Latin American novel as a far more revelatory starting point. The identification of this alternative starting point, in turn, emerges from the confluence of two phenomena: on the one hand, the pronounced rural and agrarian character acquired by Latin American novels in the period between 1910 and 1970, giving birth to a form I call the agrarian novel; and, on the other hand, the salience of the so-called agrarian question during the same period as an inquiry into how capitalism might or might not transform agrarian societies in Latin America and indeed around the world.

In the half century running between 1910 and 1970, the Latin American novel acquired, more than at any moment before or since, a pronounced rural and agrarian bent. To borrow the Cuban critic Juan Marinello's apt formulation, Latin American narrative entered a distinctly "agrarian phase."[8] In broad terms, whereas previous literary currents had looked mainly to urban and European locales for inspiration, early twentieth-century works performed an abrupt turn inward, toward the region's vast rural hinterlands. At the same time, the novel achieved prominence over

literary forms such as poetry, which had enjoyed great prestige in the nineteenth century. In the 1920s, for example, regionalist novels like Ricardo Güiraldes's *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926) and Rómulo Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara* (1929) began to register rural speech patterns and customs as meticulously as a previous generation of poets had collected French literary references and *objets d'art*. In Mexico, the irruption in 1910 of the world's first major agrarian revolution sparked a decades-spanning corpus of novels dedicated to examining the rise and fall of mass peasant insurgency, such as Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo* (1915), Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho* (1931) and Rafael Muñoz's *Vámonos con Pancho Villa* (*Let's Go with Pancho Villa*, 1931). Throughout the 1930s, Latin American variants of the proletarian novel inspired by the victory of the Russian Revolution also turned to the countryside, to denounce the exploitation of agricultural workers on plantations, or, in the case of Andean *indigenismo*, the shocking abuses suffered by indigenous communities at the hands of landowners. In the 1940s, this corpus grew to include sprawling realist epics dedicated to tracing the rise and fall of the Brazilian cacao plantation complex, as in Jorge Amado's "cacao cycle," and the ever-intensifying expropriation of indigenous communities in Peru, as in Ciro Alegría's *El mundo es ancho y ajeno* (*Broad and Alien Is the World*, 1941) and José María Arguedas's *Yawar Fiesta* (1941). Building on these realist currents, marquee mid-century authors such as Alejo Carpentier (Cuba), Miguel Ángel Asturias (Guatemala), and Juan Rulfo (Mexico) began to experiment with the marvelous, magical, and/or mythical dimensions of popular rural traditions; the list continues with authors such as Elena Garro (Mexico), Augusto Roa Bastos (Paraguay), and João Guimarães Rosa (Brazil). In the 1960s, the authors who launched Latin American literature onto a world stage under the aegis of the "boom," including Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia), José Donoso (Chile), Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru), and Carlos Fuentes (Mexico), frequently oriented their works toward rural and provincial settings. Indeed, apart from Argentina and Uruguay, countries that experienced urbanization and industrialization early, every national literary tradition in Latin America gravitated toward the rural/agrarian world for much of the twentieth century. The "agrarian phase" of the novel was, however, a *phase*, and by the 1970s the novel's center of gravity shifted to cities once again, though on entirely different grounds from earlier periods.

As I explore in this book, the agrarian novel was a genre of transition in its own right, charged with narrating the remaking of the agrarian world over the course of the twentieth century. This novel's contribution to a history of agrarian transition has not always been easy to discern, however, on at least two counts. First, critics have been most apt to approach such novels through the lens of culture and/or identity, categories that, when taken on their own, tend to overlook the material forces that shape them. Second, the agrarian world has frequently been understood as a site of static "tradition" in opposition to a capitalist modernity nearly always defined as urban. The agrarian novels studied in this book have often been viewed as replicating the simplicity attributed to rural cultures, as in many diatribes against realist and naturalist modes.[9] In a more positive vein, the Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama's highly influential theory of narrative transculturation posited the twentieth-century novel as a mode of recovering and preserving elements of Latin America's rural cultures that were coming under threat by capitalist modernization. While Rama was correct to locate such works in the context of monumental transition, the overall effect of his analysis has been to call attention to how novels of the period preserved something old rather than revealing what, exactly, was changing. This is perhaps because Rama's theory was most interested in identifying what he termed "cultural solutions to a seemingly endless conflict" within radically heterogeneous societies, and a "balancing vision of opposing forces."[10] For Rama, the rural cultures preserved within literary texts offer a unifying narrative for societies broken up by capitalism. A more robustly dialectical approach to literature and society, however, might yield insights not only into projects of cultural reconciliation, but into the endless antagonisms driving capitalism itself in different moments, as it moved through rural worlds.[11]

Such an approach becomes possible once we consider that the agrarian world was at the crux of discussions of capitalist development across much of the planet in the twentieth century, especially in the form of the so-called agrarian question. The agrarian question, in broad strokes, asks how capitalism moves through agriculture, as a basic, defining feature of the system as a whole; or, in the German Social Democrat Karl Kautsky's widely cited definition, "*whether, and how, capital is seizing hold of agriculture, revolutionizing, making old forms of production and property untenable and creating the necessity for new ones*."[12] The reason why the

agrarian question drove inquiries into capitalist development around much of the world during the twentieth century is rather simple: When, as is the case of all human societies prior to the onset of capitalism, the majority of a given population labors in agriculture, it creates formidable obstacles to accumulation. An agrarian sector unrevolutionized by capital keeps levels of productivity low and prevents the greater division of labor necessary for manufacturing. Landowners who monopolize land are not compelled to improve production so long as they can rely on rent. Even more fundamentally, though, as Marx first taught us, people who retain access to subsistence are not compelled to meet their basic needs by way of the market, either as laborers or consumers. It was thus, as he wrote in his famous analysis of so-called "primitive" or "original" accumulation in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, that peasants had to be forcibly separated from their means of subsistence and "hurled onto the labor-market as free, unprotected and rightless proletarians. The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil is the basis of the whole process." But while this process began in England (the case that dominates debates about the origins of capitalism), it certainly did not end there. In the French edition of *Capital*, Marx added a sentence in which he made clear that the dispossession of agricultural producers was not limited to England, but instead "assumes different aspects in different countries, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different historical epochs."[13] In broad strokes, the agrarian question is nothing other than the study of these various phases and orders of succession in countries around the world: in the nineteenth century, France and Germany; in the early twentieth, the southern and eastern peripheries of Europe (especially Russia); and, for much of the twentieth century, countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

Of course, Latin American agrarian societies had been integrated into world capitalism long before the rise of the agrarian question in the twentieth century. This integration, however, had tended to be organized along colonial rather than bourgeois lines. The plunder of American metals and brutal enslavement of indigenous and African people in mines and on plantations from the sixteenth century onward were, as Marx recognized, just as key to the "original" genesis of capital as England's agrarian revolution. But the outcome of original accumulation in the colonies had a different resolution than it did in England insofar as people were

dispossessed and brutalized but did not as a result become “free” proletarians. Nor did this occur, for the most part, during the subsequent waves of dispossession that unfolded as part of Latin America’s integration into global markets in the nineteenth century. Following independence movements in the 1820s, but especially in the period between 1870 and 1930, Latin American countries were drawn into the world market as exporters of crops and raw materials on an unprecedented scale.[14] This export-driven model of accumulation, however, as numerous commentators have noted, tended to intensify colonial regimes of labor and property rather than eliminate them.[15] Slavery, debt peonage, and any number of other forced arrangements (*inquilinaje, huasipungaje, yanaconazgo,* and so on) were adapted to commodity production but not transformed from within. There is no question that capitalism shaped and, in many cases, created these arrangements. At the same time, though, capital had not revolutionized agriculture, because people retained access to subsistence, and labor remained unfree. Moreover, because the zones of accumulation were narrow, passing only through export commodity enclaves, the unproductive colonial-era estates that monopolized enormous stretches of the Latin American countryside were left largely outside of circuits of accumulation, leaving scant possibility for the growth of a home market.[16]

This nineteenth-century colonial model was not only functional but historically necessary to the accumulation of capital in one moment: Who can imagine the Industrial Revolution without the cotton, sugar, rubber, or jute produced by enslaved people in locales stretching from the US South and the Caribbean to Malaysia and Bengal? Moreover, as Rosa Luxemburg noted, the accumulation of capital in the nineteenth century constantly extracted from a “natural” (use-based) peasant economy in the colonies as a means of realizing surplus value in the metropole.[17] And yet, as a hallmark of capital’s constant movement, what facilitated accumulation in one moment became an obstacle or problem in the next. Peasants dispossessed by *latifundia* (large, privately owned agricultural estates) and transformed into serfs could revolt to create a world-historic agrarian revolution, as occurred in Mexico in 1910, demanding the dissolution of the old agrarian order and creation of a new one. On a world scale, the export model that had perpetuated colonial modes of production could itself falter and collapse, as it did after 1929, to reveal barely functioning and stunted national markets. As the nineteenth-century export model disintegrated,

Latin American countries began an arduous task of national development that often goes under the inelegant but accurate name of "import-substitution industrialization." The moment the development of the home market is posited, however, the agrarian world becomes a problem: Land monopolies would have to give way to more productive property arrangements (with rent in kind giving way to money rent); handicraft production and subsistence farming would need to be integrated into commodity production. And, not least, labor would need to become "free."

It was thus, in broad strokes, that agriculture became a kind of ground zero for nearly all aspects of capitalist development in twentieth-century Latin America. As some indication of the ubiquity of the problem, tracts bearing titles like *El problema rural*, *El problema agrario*, and *El latifundio* began to appear in the early decades of the twentieth century, invariably opening with the same lament: The colonial-era latifundio should have been destroyed with independence in the nineteenth century, but had not been, leaving countries saddled with the scourge of "feudalism."[18] Liberal reformers began to view the breakup of large estates and creation of a smallholder class as a means of staving off peasant revolt, increasing productivity, and fomenting domestic markets. Mid-century modernization theory, in turn, posited an unproductive agrarian sector as a problem that had to be resolved in order to achieve what Walt Rostow famously termed economic "takeoff," spawning decades of state-led interventions into the countryside ranging from disease prevention and irrigation improvement to the implementation of early Green Revolution technologies.[19] Meanwhile, the agrarian question also became a foundational site of engagement for socialist and communist revolutionaries: The first work of Latin American Marxist theory, José Carlos Mariátegui's *Seven Essays on Peruvian Reality* (1928), was essentially a study of this country's agrarian problem. In the 1960s and 1970s, burgeoning social science disciplines, heavily influenced by Marxist thought, produced an outpouring of works focused on agrarian topics such as the history of the hacienda, peasant revolts, and proletarianization in the countryside. The so-called "modes of production debate," which revolved around the degree to which Latin American societies could be considered "capitalist" or "feudal" in different historical moments, was frequently a debate about the agrarian world.[20] The prominence of the agrarian question, while taking specific inflections in Latin America, was not limited to this region: Nearly everywhere outside

Western Europe, the agrarian question became nearly synonymous with the question of capitalism itself in the twentieth century. This was especially the case as the world's peasantries, long identified as a bastion of conservatism in European contexts, became nearly synonymous with the very possibility of revolution, in contexts ranging from Mexico to Russia and China to Vietnam.[21]

This rather cursory review is meant to establish the centrality of the agrarian question to Latin American social discourse in the twentieth century and, by extension, the novel. As I explore throughout this book, the novel made a singular though underrecognized contribution to the agrarian question by trying to understand how capitalism might—or might not—remake rural social worlds. In a previous work, I examined how Latin American literature between 1870 and 1930 produced key insights into the contradictions of liberal, export-driven commodity regimes.[22] In this book, a sequel of sorts, I turn to examining how the agrarian novel mapped a subsequent phase of capitalist transformation in the region between 1910 and 1970. In the broadest possible terms, while Export Age literature oriented itself toward the global market, the twentieth-century agrarian novel oriented itself toward an incipient home market. Especially after the crisis of 1929, the laissez-faire model of the Export Age morphed into a state-led model of development widely known as import-substitution industrialization. Reaching a high point between the 1930s and the 1970s, this model of accumulation sought, as its name suggested, to replace export dependency with national industry. In its inception, this book aimed to identify and analyze the literature of import-substitution industrialization in Latin America. I was quickly faced, however, with the overwhelmingly agrarian character of the period's canonical works. This agrarian character, while initially presenting itself as a problem of interpretation, offered itself as a solution as soon as the agrarian world was identified as the literal ground over which a new era of accumulation would have to pass. I began to posit the hypothesis that if there was indeed a literature of state-led capitalist development, its principal point of departure was not the industrialized city, but the vast countryside.

The agrarian question allows us to reframe the twentieth-century Latin American novel, just as the agrarian novel is poised to produce new insights into the uneven dynamics of capitalist transition in Latin America. With respect to the novel, the agrarian question allows us to approach the sheer

content of texts differently. The novel's turn to examine rural hinterlands, for example, acquires meaning beyond the frame of national identity into which it is invariably placed, to offer an inquiry into the possibility of creating robust domestic markets. The landowners and peasants who populate agrarian novels become available not just as local color, but as personifications of property and labor arrangements undergoing processes of change. Likewise, plots focusing on a landowner's loss of land, the rising fortunes of upstart peasants, or the swallowing of old plantations into larger factory farms allow us to shift our gaze from the nostalgia-glazed haze in which these works are often enveloped to glimpse a wider arc of historical transition. These constellations of agrarian-themed content converge in turn to unearth the specifically agrarian questions posed and answered by novels: Regionalist novels that focus on large estates, for example, ask and answer questions about the crisis of the latifundio and its uncertain future in the 1910s and 1920s (chapter 1). The "novel of the Mexican Revolution" and Andean indigenismo pose and answer questions about how peasants might become free from the domination of the hacienda system, and, once this objective has been achieved, which fates might await them (chapter 3). An experimental author like Juan Rulfo, whose works are haunted by images of the Mexican peasantry as a kind of living dead, ask and answer how, and under which conditions, this class might persist or disappear (chapter 4).

Reframed in this manner, the twentieth-century Latin American novel stands to make its own unique contribution to the agrarian question, and, more broadly, the global history of capitalism. As a key site of inspiration for this study, Raymond Williams's magisterial *The Country and the City* revealed how contrasting images of urban and rural England combine to form a picture of a total system—capitalism—in its different moments of becoming. Even the most quaint or backward-seeming representations of the countryside reveal themselves as part of a larger social whole: "Most obviously since the beginning of the capitalist-agrarian mode of production, our powerful images of country and city have been ways of responding to a whole social development. This is why, in the end, we must not limit ourselves to their contrast, but go on to see their interrelations and through these the real shape of the underlying crisis."[23] And if, as Williams shows, English literature provides one means of grasping the shape of this crisis, the twentieth-century Latin American novel provides a related but different

one. While the agrarian transitions that Latin American novels evoke are perhaps less familiar than those that occurred in England, France, or any other imperial center, they are no less important to the history of capitalism. This is not least because, until very recently, the greater part of humanity inhabited what we might call the global countryside. The literature of this global countryside, in turn, has much to contribute to our understanding of agrarian transitions that resulted in societies that look very different from their metropolitan counterparts.

The Novel on the Road to Capitalism

My focus in this book on the novel is consonant with the salience of this form in twentieth-century Latin American literature; on a deeper level, it corresponds to the key role played by the novel in charting transitions to and within capitalism. This is not only because the novel was itself born amid the consolidation of bourgeois societies in Europe, but because its formal dynamics both presume and attempt to come to terms with a world in the throes of constant and unpredictable change. Along these lines, we can think of Georg Lukács's classic analysis of the nineteenth-century European historical novel as a form that attempted to glimpse, against a backdrop of massive tumult, "the way society moves."[24] This historicizing verve was linked, for Lukács, to the novel's attempt to understand how capitalist societies differed fundamentally from those of the past. It was thus that, as Fredric Jameson has noted, one of the key aims of the historical novel was to depict "the passage of the old order to a bourgeois society."[25] If, for Lukács, nineteenth-century realism was uniquely capable of performing this task, a whole tradition of materialist critique—Jameson's included—has analyzed how historical movement might be grasped through a variety of subsequent aesthetic forms. The classic tripartite periodizing schema composed of realism/modernism/postmodernism is often deployed as a flexible baseline for periodizing novels; such critiques, however, have been carried out almost exclusively with respect to the European and North American heartlands of accumulation. One of the aims of this book is to ask what such a periodizing project might look like from the vantage point of twentieth-century Latin American societies.

Specifically, I am interested in how Latin American novels plotted their own set of "roads" to capitalism over the course of the twentieth century. I borrow the metaphor of the road from Vladimir Lenin's famous typology of how the agrarian question could play out in different parts of the world. Following Marx's understanding of primitive or original accumulation, Lenin's typology stresses that the English road, in which yeomen became bourgeois farmers, and peasants became proletarians, was not the only possible path to capitalism in agriculture. In other places, such as Eastern Europe, where large estates dominated, a "Prussian" or "Junker" path could assert itself, in which landowners attempted to modernize their estates from within. In settler colonies like the US and Australia, where independent smallholdings prevailed, a "farmer" road drove richer farmers to push out poorer ones to eventually transform agriculture into a branch of industry. In both cases, the end result would be capitalism—unless, that is, a revolution against private property prevailed (an eventuality that creates new questions for agriculture, to be sure). And yet, the specific paths taken to this destination, Lenin theorized, would vary considerably in character and duration, and likely yield highly divergent social arrangements.[26]

Lenin's metaphor of "the road to capitalism" becomes illuminating for the study of the twentieth-century Latin American novel by way of a similar dialectic of particularity and universality, content, and form. The novel, like Lenin's roads, constantly encounters riotously diverse social raw materials that bump up against the imperatives of *form*. Hence, while the sheer content of agrarian novels marks a first point of entry into their categorization and analysis, it is ultimately their shifting formal apparatuses that make different "roads" to capitalism appear within them. As a baseline for this formal inquiry, all of the novels studied in this book mark an attempt to capture some aspect of rural reality. As the Brazilian Marxist critic Antonio Candido once noted, the gravitation of the early twentieth-century novel to rural areas forced it to "focus on local reality," as part of a wider attempt to address the region's underdevelopment.[27] Depending on the historical situation, attempts to capture this reality could express themselves as realism, but, in keeping with the sui generis sequence of literary genres in Latin America, they could also take the form of romance, naturalism, high-modernist experimentation, or some unlikely combination of forms. Along these lines, agrarian novels also frequently enlist rural folktales or myth into their narrative apparatuses to a degree unheard of in

metropolitan fiction. Such an operation is perhaps most familiar to readers as “magical realism,” a category that, however useful as shorthand, often tends toward an abstract, hypostatized rendering of Latin America as caught somewhere between “tradition” and “modernity.” The task, as I see it, is instead to ask what the novel’s shifting formal arrangements might reveal about historically concrete paths to capitalism, in the manner of way stations along a winding road. Drawing from Fredric Jameson’s notion of the political unconscious, genre presents us with a “limiting situation” in which the gap between the rules of genre and a text’s singular composition provides mediated access to historical movement.[28]

Such formal breaks tend to assert themselves with even greater dramatic force in the peripheries of world capitalism, where genres born in Europe had to contend with social situations that stretched them to new limits. Here I return to the insights gleaned by a materialist tradition of Latin American literary criticism pioneered in the 1970s, but largely abandoned in the wake of poststructuralism, that focused on the relationship between the dynamics of peripheral capitalist (under)development and literary form. Jean Franco, for example, writes that the “mysterious oddness” of Latin American texts can only be understood by way of a dialectical model that places “the dominant cultures of the world and their dependencies” in conversation with one another.[29] Sylvia Wynter, in turn, revealed the Caribbean novel as projecting a constant tension between “plot and plantation,” or between people’s struggles for subsistence and the “bewitched reality” of the global market.[30] Throughout this book, I call on Roberto Schwarz’s inquiries into attempts to import European genres like realism, which presumed formal freedom and individualism, to nineteenth-century Brazil, a society organized around chattel slavery and patriarchal structures of patronage and favor. The contradiction, Schwarz shows, resulted in comically imbalanced novels that, more than marking an aesthetic shortcoming, “reveal the objective conflicts—the ideological incongruities—that occurred as a result of the transplantation of the novel and of European culture to our country.”[31]

These kinds of historical insights might only be gleaned, as Schwarz notes elsewhere, through a never-ceasing dialectic of “literary form and social process” that refuses a reduction of either term to the other.[32] It is precisely this dialectic that interests me here, as a means of analyzing and

periodizing the twentieth-century agrarian novel. For when a dialectical relationship between aesthetic form and history is maintained and not calcified into a set of ready-made pronouncements, it provides a foundation for what is in fact a supple and ever-changing mode of aesthetic critique. Placing the novel in dialogue with agrarian history, that is, does not reduce the meaning of the former to that of the latter. To the contrary, it offers a starting point from which the work of art, like the dialectic itself, becomes free to move. Conversely, the novel, in its open-ended dialectic with history, becomes poised to illuminate that history by uncovering hitherto invisible aspects of social existence.

As an entry point into a wider dialectic of literary form and social process, my basic unit of analysis in this book is the single novel in dialogue with different aspects of the agrarian question. The argument is accretive, however, insofar as the resulting corpus of agrarian novels, taken together, posits an overarching narrative arc with respect to agrarian transition. To this end, I have separated the book into three main sections. The first two sections examine a historical road to capitalism in relation to the class perspectives and novelistic subgenres to which it gave rise; a third section examines the urban capitalist landscape that emerged from agrarian transition. The first section, “Landowner Roads,” examines how a dominant landed perspective embedded in much Latin American fiction navigated the long decline of this class between the late 1910s and late 1950s, amid the crisis of export economies, world war, and (in the case of Mexico) agrarian revolution. The second section, “Vías Campesinas,” examines the distinct peasant perspectives that emerged to animate the novel in relation to two world-historic revolutions—the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the Russian Revolution of 1917—and, in their aftermaths, the model of smallholder agriculture that peaked with land reform projects in the 1960s.[33] The third section, simply titled “Capitalism,” set in the period after 1960, examines the perspectives and forms that emerged to register the dissolution of both the landowner and peasant roads and the transformation of the majority of the region’s inhabitants into urban proletarians (though often without access to a regular wage), and hence closure of an era.

Within these three sections, individual chapters ask how novels plotted “roads” to capitalism in broadly chronological fashion. Working back and forth between literary and economic history, I examine how some of the best-known novels of the twentieth-century Latin American canon offer

new means of grasping agrarian transition. I have chosen not to restrict inquiry to any single nation-state as a means of amplifying the claim that the agrarian novel's inquiries were anything but provincial. Instead, the recurrence of aesthetic modes in different contexts points toward social processes that were region- and even world-embracing. Each chapter is constructed as a cross-regional dialogue in which an author from one national context poses and answers a question that is taken in new directions by a second author from a different national context. With this organization, I appeal to the double meaning of the word "question" in English, as both problem and interrogative, to identify the salience of an extra-literary problem as a structuring instance of the novel, and the endlessly creative ways in which the novel responds to that instance.

Within this comparative framework, I have constructed a narrative that clusters around Mexico, Peru, and Chile, with some attention paid to Argentina, Venezuela, and Brazil. This geographical distribution is both conscious, insofar as it reflects areas of personal expertise and interest, and unconscious, insofar as it emerged from the questions raised by novels themselves. Along these lines, nearly all chapters include a section on Mexico, an emphasis that is consonant with the centrality of agrarian revolution and its aftermath within this country's novelistic tradition. Such a focus has in turn led to the omission of other key contexts, such as the Caribbean and Colombia. Hopefully, however, the corpus selected for inclusion in this study proves larger than the sum of its parts, posing a set of agrarian questions that might be asked of any number of novels; the answers they provide, of course, would be new and unique.

Chapter 1, "Whither the Latifundio? Landowner Romance," takes as its point of departure the regionalist currents that reoriented Spanish American fiction toward the rural world in the 1910s and 1920s. Focusing on the Argentine author-landowner Ricardo Güiraldes's novels *Raucho* (1917) and *Don Segundo Sombra*, and the Venezuelan writer and future president Rómulo Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara*, I reinterpret regionalism as attempting to resolve a founding question of the Latin American agrarian transition: What to do with the large estate? Güiraldes's and Gallegos's novels provide particularly compelling answers to this question through their wildly contradictory attempts to chart a path away from the large estate before abruptly returning to it, as if by some mysterious external force. In formal terms, this about-face resolves the real-world problem of the large estate

through a flight into the mist-enveloped realm of romance. Long a preferred genre of Latin America's landed classes, romance reemerges with regionalism as a kind of compensation for an inability to find a solution to emerging agrarian problems.

Chapter 2, "How Are Oligarchies Unmade? Landowner Realism," examines the novelistic forms that emerged when the problems facing the landed class could no longer be managed by romance. Focusing on José Lins do Rego and Rosario Castellanos, this chapter identifies how authors hailing from landed classes in Northeastern Brazil and Southern Mexico, respectively, negotiated the historical forces contributing to oligarchic decline. Lins's *Bangüê* (1934), a novel from the author's "sugarcane cycle," attempts to provide a realistic account of the displacement of a formerly opulent planter class by centralized sugar factories. Paradoxically, however, the realist examination of landowner decline invariably stretches beyond the bounds of realism because the perspective that sustains it is disintegrating. In order to remain realist, the writer must find a new perspective, as occurs in Lins's later novels. Alternatively, if the novel's perspective remains trained on a decadent landed class, it morphs into a gothic mode that plumbs the psychic depths of this decline. This eventuality reaches spectacular heights in the Mexican author Rosario Castellanos's *Balún Canán* (1957), in which a first-person bildungsroman focusing on a girl's youth in 1930s Chiapas is literally bisected by an omnisciently narrated story of indigenous rebellion on her family's estate. With this structure, we see how an oligarchy enters irrevocable decline, but also, dialectically, how it refuses to die.

Chapter 3, "How Do Peasants Become (Doubly) Free? The Modern Agrarian Epic," backs up a few decades to trace the emergence of a peasant perspective in the novel with the onset of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 and, with it, the birth of an epic realist practice in Latin America. Guided by Lukács's classic analysis of how the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars gave birth to the historical novel in Europe, I examine how the Mexican and Russian Revolutions sparked realist novels that attempted to evoke the granular movements of the agrarian transition in Latin America, particularly the liberation of peasants from the large estate system. I first trace how Mariano Azuela discovered, in *Los de abajo* (*The Underdogs*), an epic realist practice that tracked the rise and fall of a world-historic peasant insurgency. Azuela's realist vision was limited by a bourgeois worldview

saturated with pessimism; Marxist writers, however, took the agrarian epic in new directions. The second part of the chapter studies how José María Arguedas forged a socialist- and indigenous-inflected realism to examine the surprising and contradictory directions taken by highland communities in Peru. This project reaches a key point of inflection in his *Yawar Fiesta*, a novel that examines how the fight for freedom from landowners might, amid encroaching commodity relations, unintentionally open onto the dissolution of communal bonds.

Chapter 4, "How Long Can the Peasantry Last? Anti-Epics of Rural Immiseration," turns to examine how the epic realist impulse that arose from ongoing battles for peasant freedom reached an impasse in later moments. While the two authors at the center of this chapter, Juan Rulfo and José Donoso, are often vaunted precisely as non- or anti-realists, I approach them from the standpoint of a realism whose moments of disintegration and renewal might awaken a historical imperative within their works. The breakdown of realism in Juan Rulfo's short story collection *The Burning Plain* (1953) and landmark novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955), I argue, allows us to identify the historical movement beneath the surface of a seemingly stunted present in the aftermath of Mexican land reform. In its contradictory logic, land reform was to both protect and immiserate a small peasantry, in a process so protracted that it appears in Rulfo's works as a form of purgatory. José Donoso's novel *Hell Has No Limits* (1966), written in the period of Chilean land reform during the Alliance for Progress era, reawakens a realist impulse to reveal how a smallholder road might finally end. With a plot centered on a brothel in a dying town on the edge of an estate, the novel gives a certain finality to Rulfo's purgatory by way of the image of hell.

Chapter 5, "What Are Cities Made Of? The Boom's Vanishing Agrarian Mediators," turns to examine which kinds of novels and perspectives became possible amid the collapse of rural social structures and mass migration to cities. In the 1960s, the decade of the world-famous boom generation, the novel revealed the origins of the modern city in the still-smoldering ruins of the previous rural order. Focusing on a trio of experimental novels—Carlos Fuentes's *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962), José Donoso's *The Obscene Bird of Night* (1970), and José María Arguedas's aforementioned *The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below*—I study how each splintered, and sometimes openly schizoid,

literary perspective performs the separations necessary to the capitalist mode of production at the same time that it names the epochal transitions that produced that splintered perspective in the first place. Written at the tail end of the historical cycles they seek to evoke, these experimental novels project a long arc of agrarian transition that is both uniquely visible in hindsight and, at the same time, beginning to disappear. Agrarian transition hence emerges as a vanishing mediator that would become increasingly unavailable to subsequent generations of authors.

A coda, "What's Left of the Countryside? The Twenty-First Century Post-Agrarian Novel," observes how, after the 1960s, the triumph of the so-called Green Revolution and subsumption of the world's agricultures by capitalism for the first time in human history transformed the contemporary Latin American novel into a post-agrarian form. The contemporary novel, like Latin American societies, is predominantly urban in orientation; a recent spate of novels, however, have revisited a countryside that is barely recognizable as such. With previous "roads," perspectives, and forms exhausted, the post-agrarian novel has had to invent new ones: Samanta Schweblin's *Fever Dream* (2014), for example, routes itself through the perspective of an urban middle-class consumer to imagine a horror story rooted in the depeopled, financialized, and pesticide-soaked soy fields of Argentina. Fernanda Melchor's *Hurricane Season* (2017), by contrast, occupies the perspective of a post-peasant surplus population to relate the murder of a trans woman in a fictional Mexican town. At stake in both cases is the extent to which the contemporary post-agrarian novel might retain purchase on historical movement in an era that seems to foreclose it.

The End of the Road?

My return to the twentieth-century Latin American novel in conjunction with the agrarian question aims to offer a prehistory of the present, not to confirm something we already know, but instead to reawaken a sense of movement in the past and, as a result, provide a new site of reckoning with the present. As a result of the completion of the transitions traced in this book, the agrarian question has lost much of the interest it once generated; so too, quite frankly, has the novel. But as I hope to show in the pages that follow, a return to the classic agrarian question and the critical models it

engendered can help denaturalize the contours of a post-agrarian present that is both recent in emergence and far-reaching in its effects. A return to the twentieth-century novel can, in turn, reveal startling discontinuities buried deep within the past and, consequently, allow us to imagine how things might be different in the future. This is not to say that the solutions offered by the novels studied in this book are in any way redemptive, much less prescriptive. What's more, the outcomes of the historical transitions they trace are, quite frankly, despair-inducing: Everyday exchange relations have consigned vast sectors of the world's population to misery on a daily basis; ongoing ecocide, in many cases driven by capitalist agriculture, increasingly threatens all life on earth with annihilation. It is poignant in this regard to recall that already in 1973, Raymond Williams wrote that an "insane overconfidence" in the powers of capital to dominate the world's agriculture "has brought us to the point where however we precisely assess it the risk to human survival is becoming evident, or if we survive, as I think we shall, there is the clear impossibility of continuing as we are."[34] Fifty years on, the prospect of continuing as we are has become even more intolerable. It remains an urgent task to conjure utopias beyond capitalism, and, more specifically, capitalist agriculture. There is no route to that future, however, that does not retrace in some manner the paths that brought us to the present moment. As a small wager made by this book, the twentieth-century agrarian novel, in conjunction with that history, might yet provide insights into a present that only seems like the end of the road.

Landowner Roads

1

Whither the Latifundio? Landowner Romance

Latifundia perdidere Italiam.
Pliny the Elder

A Homecoming

We begin in medias res, along a path traveled by a landowner. In the opening pages of Rómulo Gallegos's landmark 1929 novel *Doña Bárbara*, the novel's protagonist, Santos Luzardo, travels toward his ancestral estate deep in the plains region of Venezuela. Two "bronzed" oarsmen alternately plunge poles into the muddy water to propel a canoe forward under a blazing midday sun.[1] Santos, meanwhile, a white man dressed in the manner of "the city dweller who is careful of his appearance," contemplates the wilderness (4). His objective, we soon learn, is to sell the family estate, Altamira, and, in keeping with the predilections of the region's landed elite, move to Europe. But upon arriving in the plains, the landowner encounters a new reality that changes his mind: A *mestiza* (mixed-race) woman, the eponymous Doña Bárbara, has used her feminine wiles to usurp vast tracts of land, including a portion of the Luzardo estate. For the rest of the novel, Santos will remain in the plains region to fight the backward forces personified by Doña Bárbara and attempt to instate "progress."

Santos Luzardo's voyage to the plains is emblematic of the homecoming staged by Spanish American fiction beginning in the 1910s, one known in broad terms as regionalism. As an umbrella term for various subcurrents, such as *criollismo, la novela telúrica*, and *la novela de la tierra*, Spanish American regionalism marked a decisive phase in the continent's literary production. In broad terms, whereas a previous generation of poets and novelists had faced outward to embrace European aesthetic forms, objects, and civilizational ideals, early twentieth-century regionalisms turned inward, to identify and incorporate local or homegrown materials for literary expression. As an example of this shift, one of the dominant literary currents of the late nineteenth century, Spanish American *modernismo*, had famously showcased references to French authors (Paul Valéry or the Goncourt brothers), interminable catalogues of bibelots, and sumptuously decorated interiors.[2] Early twentieth-century regionalism, however, inverted this Europhilic aesthetic. On a spatial level, foreign or urban spaces gave way to rural ones. As an extension of this logic, the satyrs, nymphs, and marble statues that populated previous *modernista* texts such as the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío's *Azul* (1888) were exchanged for "bronzed" oarsmen, bongos, and ranch hands. On a larger level, Spanish American modernismo's dedication to art for art's sake, particularly via poetry, gave way to an attempt to evoke local reality—and, more specifically, rural reality—by way of the novel.

When tasked with explaining why this homecoming took place when it did, critics have often relied on a narrative of cultural identity. As a well-known story goes, regionalists looked to the rural to find "traditional" materials with which to craft a more authentic national or regionwide literary aesthetic. Carlos Alonso has shown, in a deconstructionist vein, how this claim to authenticity was always something of a ruse, as texts themselves constantly undermined their own authority.[3] But such interpretations, while in some ways quite helpful, are incomplete insofar as they do not attempt to account for the larger structural dynamics at play in the regionalist turn inward and, as a result, the precise ways that novels might have encoded the transition occurring in societies across Latin America in the early twentieth century.

At the very least, regionalism marked a spatial recalibration in the literary imaginary, away from European metropoles and national capitals and toward rural hinterlands. Going a step further, this spatial recalibration

itself anticipated a larger economic transition: a move away from a liberal, export model that principally served foreign markets and toward the foundation of a long-delayed and stunted domestic market. In proposing that we look at the material lineaments of regionalism, I do not mean to propose, of course, that literary texts evoked economic transitions in a transparent or straightforward manner: The mediations between texts and social contexts remain to be uncovered and examined. Nor do I mean to suggest that the previous emphasis on foreign themes and settings automatically occluded social realities, while the turn toward autochthonous ones automatically elucidated them. To the contrary, the foreign-inspired modernista salon might alert us to the real conditions governing Latin American artistic production (and societies) in a moment of export-oriented capitalist modernization. Conversely, the regionalist emphasis on local settings might just as easily occlude those conditions. What I do wish to propose is that regionalism, no matter how fixated on local color, responded to concerns that were far from provincial.

But if the hypothesis that the regionalist search for the national bases of culture broadly anticipated a new, national phase of capitalist accumulation in Latin America, it remains to be stated why, on the level of manifest content, this search took place in the rural hinterlands of the nation-state, and not, say, in expanding cities. As I explore throughout this chapter, early twentieth-century regionalist novels were drawn to the rural world not because it was a site of stable tradition (though this is often the ideological effect they produce), but because this world had become a problem in need of a solution. This problem was none other than the agrarian problem in its earliest instantiation, especially with respect to what was perhaps the key unifying feature of an otherwise intensely variegated Latin American countryside: the persistence of the large estate or latifundium (latifundio).

So long as export economies dominated, the large estate had not been a pressing problem for elites or the state. In some cases, pre-existing latifundia were modernized and adapted to the needs of export commodity production, frequently on the basis of outright slavery or any number of coercive arrangements like debt peonage and sharecropping. In others, the weak state of the internal market allowed them to persist, seemingly unperturbed by either economic exigency or the legal norms of the state. But with the decadence of the export model in the early twentieth century, the large estate did indeed become a problem; in some quarters, it became

the pressing problem facing Latin American societies. As an indication of its scope, scores of tracts began to be published in the early decades of the twentieth century bearing names such as *Mexico's Rural Problem* (1917), *The Problem of Agricultural Production* (Chile, 1919), *Agrarian Questions* (Argentina, 1921), and *El latifundio* (Venezuela, 1937). Tellingly, despite the national differences such texts reflect, all begin with the exact same premise: The colonial latifundium, instead of being abolished by independence, was strengthened, leading to any number of national ills. These included, depending on the country, the nonproductive monopolization of land by an absentee landed class, the stunting of national markets, and, in many cases, the brutal oppression of peasants tethered to estates. And while authors would propose different solutions to this problem depending on their political leanings, they all agreed on the intractable nature of the large estate as the veritable cornerstone of the Latin American agrarian question.

The question of the large estate was also the cornerstone of the regionalist novel. Much like the Latin American countryside itself, the particularity mobilized by the Spanish American regionalist novel unfolded against a backdrop of a single institution: the large estate. Two of the three best-known examples of 1920s Spanish American regionalism, both studied in this chapter, have landowners as their protagonists: Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara* and Ricardo Güiraldes's *Don Segundo Sombra*. The protagonist of a third paradigmatic example of the genre, José Eustacio Rivera's *La vorágine* (*The Vortex*, Colombia, 1924), is not a landowner, but an urban poet swept into the violent world of the Amazonian rubber trade. The general tendency toward landed characters returns, however, in lesser-known regionalist novels such as Mariano Latorre's *Zurzulita* (Chile, 1920) and Enrique Larreta's *Zogoibi* (Argentina, 1926).[4] Further, the plots of many regionalist novels hinge on the fate of the estate itself, along the lines of inheritance and marriage, modernization schemes, or the appearance of upstart peasants in the landowner's midst. In this way, the so-called novel of the land is, fundamentally, a novel of and about the latifundio in a moment of transition. The reason is obvious enough: the Latin American novel, when traveling to the countryside in the early decades of the twentieth century, could not avoid the large estate or the landowner. This focus on the large estate, in turn, helps explain why regionalism was dominant in Chile, Argentina, and Venezuela but not in Mexico, where mass peasant

insurrection in 1910 gave way to a radically different kind of novel, the so-called "novel of the Mexican Revolution" (studied in chapters 2 and 3). Nor was it dominant in the Andes, where indigenous rebellions ramped up throughout the 1920s and 1930s to produce twentieth-century indigenismo (examined in chapter 3). Regionalism, and more specifically criollismo, tended to crop up in contexts where landowner rule had not been fundamentally challenged by the possibility of revolution. Even so, at the very least, the regionalist novel's gravitation toward the large estate alerts us to a crisis of some sort, one that authors attempted to solve by narrative means.

But if the early twentieth-century regionalist novel was a novel of and about landowners and the latifundio, this is only a first step of analysis. Placing texts in an economic context allows us to see them in a new light, but it is not an end in itself. Rather, my aim in the following pages is to show how a set of novels by Gallegos and Güiraldes posed and answered agrarian questions in a manner that only the novel could, on the level of aesthetic form. As critics such as Antonio Candido have remarked, regionalism was at bottom an attempt to render Latin American reality in its dominant rural guise.[5] And indeed, the novels chosen for study in this chapter all take a concrete rural reality as a point of departure: concretely, the latifundio as a problem in need of a solution. What is most intriguing about the novels examined here, however, is that they can't take the path of either naturalism (a literary mode in vogue at the time) or realism; instead, they can only solve their problems through flight into an older, fantasy-laden region of romance. As Northrop Frye has remarked, romance tends to be the favored genre of ruling classes, an observation that rings particularly true in Latin America.[6] At the same time, though, because these twentieth-century novels take reality as a point of departure, they can't function purely as romances either. Taking a cue from Roberto Schwarz's analyses of nineteenth-century Brazilian literature, I propose that the aesthetic disunity that characterizes these novels sheds light on a wider social dynamic, one that, as I explore below, stretches from the rural estate to the most abstract realms of the global market. For while novels by Güiraldes and Gallegos present us with rather naked class apologetics that confirm the goodness of landowners, their wildly contradictory textual dynamics attest to something far less obvious and self-assured: on the one hand, social contradictions that

refuse to be banished and, on the other, the reactionary energies regularly called forth to contain any attempt at change.

How to Become a *Gaucho*: Export Crisis and Landowner Romance

With regionalism, a previous generation of European-focused literature suddenly and forcefully turned to the countryside to forge, amid crumbling export regimes, a new sense of the national. The Argentine writer-landowner Ricardo Güiraldes is emblematic in this regard: Born the scion of a wealthy family of ranchers, he grew up between his family's estate in the pampas and Paris. His first writings were entirely in French, the undisputed language of "civilization" for the Argentine export-era elite. But at a certain point, Güiraldes began to speak the language of the *gaucho*, the legendary horseman and cattle rustler who had long served as an icon of national barbarism but also authenticity, manliness, and valor. Güiraldes wasn't, of course, the first man of letters—or indeed landowner—to speak this language: the *gauchesco*, a poetic tradition dedicated to representing gaucho lifeways and speech, was one of Argentina's dominant literary traditions in the nineteenth century, one that reached its apex with José Hernández's epics *Martín Fierro* (1872) and *La vuelta de Martín Fierro* (*The Return of Martín Fierro*, 1879). But Güiraldes was, perhaps, the first writer-landowner to want to *become* a gaucho, a choice even more notable given the European predilections of the fin-de-siècle landed elite. Studio photos show Güiraldes dressed as a gaucho, an attire he reportedly liked to wear while performing duties on his estate, La Porteña. In response to this performance, the French writer Paul Groussac quipped that Güiraldes wore his *chiripa*, an article of gaucho clothing, on top of a tuxedo.[7] But Güiraldes's desire to become a gaucho was most powerfully rendered in his literary production, in which the landowner enters into spiritual and homosocial communion with the gaucho. His classic novel *Don Segundo Sombra*, along these lines, is dedicated to none other than "the gaucho whom I bear within myself, sacredly, as the monstrance bears the host."[8]

The question, though, is, why the Frenchified landowner-writer suddenly wanted to fuse with the gaucho. In Güiraldes's case, this sudden desire can be understood in conjunction with the crisis of the Argentine agro-export economy in the early twentieth century, and with it, the uncertain status of

the large estate at its center. At different moments in the nation's post-independence history, the large estate had been tied to the persistence of Spanish colonialism in the countryside. Memorably, for the liberal intellectual and eventual president D. F. Sarmiento, the immense ranches (*estancias*) created during the Spanish colonial era and maintained after independence were a sign of barbarism, which would preferably be replaced with smallholdings akin to those in the US plains.[9] Across Latin America, nineteenth-century republican and liberal intellectuals manifested a similar republican-minded preference for smallholdings over the large estates that had dominated the colonial era.[10] Here we might recall one of the first major literary works of the independence era, the Venezuelan Andrés Bello's "Silva a la agricultura de la zona tórrida" ("Ode to Tropical Agriculture," 1826), a neoclassical Georgic poem that celebrates the simple goodness of agriculture. This poem identifies the independent smallholder as a fount of civic virtue even as its opening lines herald tropical products such as sugarcane that could only be grown on large plantations. This contradictory appeal to the virtues of the smallholder and the stubborn reality of the large estate (which more often than not depended upon enslaved labor or servitude) would persist in nineteenth-century novels such as the Colombian author Jorge Isaacs's *María* (1867) and the Cuban author José Martí's *Lucía Jerez* (1885). In all these cases, the aesthetic and political ideal of smallholding collided with the material imperative of integrating national economies into global markets as producers of agricultural commodities and raw materials, a transformation that would not eliminate but strengthen the large estate throughout the nineteenth century.

This was especially true in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Argentina when, following a genocidal campaign of enclosure against the pampa's indigenous inhabitants, liberal elites managed to integrate the country into the global market as a producer of beef and wheat. With this movement, Argentina became, effectively, a far-flung extension of the British countryside; or as the gauchesco poet José Hernández put it matter-of-factly in the manual he wrote for landowners like himself, Argentina was a "rural colony of Europe."[11] This market integration was led, in turn, by large landholdings: The Güiraldes estate, for example, stood at around 6,000 hectares, or 60 square kilometers. While often owned by colonial- or independence-era families, these estates were by no means feudal; instead, they were transformed to operate according to the logic of the world

market. Landowners alternated between beef and wheat production depending on market conditions and rented their land to immigrant tenant farmers (*chacareros*) from Southern and Eastern Europe, many of whom had been peasants in their countries of origin. Land, in turn, became an instrument of financial speculation. During the golden era of export-led modernization from the 1880s to the 1910s, Argentine landowners became the closest thing the country had to a national bourgeoisie: Men like Ricardo Güiraldes's father, Manuel, became arbiters of "progress" who connected the country to foreign markets and refashioned Buenos Aires in the image of European cities by way of hippodromes, theaters, and wide boulevards. The countryside, meanwhile, housed the productive activity that made this opulence possible.

But the rural economy, born a creature of the world market, was notoriously unstable. In 1890, fierce land speculation resulted in a financial crisis that bankrupted the entire country; slow recovery was interrupted by the arrival of World War I, which cut Argentina off from its main market in Great Britain. Economic crisis, in turn, provoked social unrest, especially among immigrant tenant farmers. As a result of this crisis, the landowners, who had become nearly synonymous with progressive bourgeois values, became identified as regressive. As the historian Roy Hora puts it, with fin-de-siècle crisis, the image of the landowner shifted from stolid bourgeois to that of the "selfish and indolent *latifundista*, the cruel exploiter of workers of the land."[12]

Güiraldes's first novel, *Raucho*, is an early attempt to diagnose and resolve this crisis of landed legitimacy by novelistic means. Published near the end of World War I, *Raucho* (a nickname for Ricardo) is a semi-autobiographical bildungsroman that begins with the protagonist's birth on an idyllic ranch in the province of Buenos Aires, surrounded by a salubrious countryside and loving peons. At an early age, however, he is sent to Buenos Aires for an education, where, in the context of booming cereal and beef exports to Europe, he develops a predilection for French literature, the Jockey Club, and the theater. Raucho's father, Don Leandro, a landowner whose ranch produces hundreds of steers for the English market, becomes even richer by renting his lands to immigrant tenant farmers, wealth that allows Raucho to travel to Paris. There, the prodigal son cavorts with courtesans, dines at Maxim's, and gambles. After being cut off by his father, who is having economic difficulties of his own because of a drought,

Raucho gambles away his inheritance at the tables in Monte Carlo. Plagued with debts, his nerves destroyed, he ends up in a Swiss sanatorium.

Just as the instability faced by export economies at the end of the nineteenth century was not limited to Argentina, the crisis faced by the male protagonist of *Raucho* was by no means unique to Güiraldes's fiction. A wider subgenre of fin-de-siècle fiction, one we might call the narrative of dissolute oligarchic youth, emerged to trace the moral crisis and disintegration of a landed male protagonist. In novels such as Eugenio Cambaceres's *Sin rumbo* (Aimless, Argentina, 1885), José Asunción Silva's *De sombremesa* (*After-Dinner Conversation*, Colombia, 1887–96), Luis Orrego Luco's *Casa grande* (Big house, Chile, 1908), Rómulo Gallegos's *El último Solar* (The last solar, Venezuela, 1920), an oligarchic male protagonist allegorizes the imbalanced, distorted, and outer-directed nature of fin-de-siècle export economies. They are invariably drawn outward, almost fatally, to cities like Buenos Aires or Paris, and tend toward wild speculation rather than production, sickness rather than health, and illicit rather than matrimonial sex. But as a general rule of the genre, there is no solution to this imbalance: Instead, in the manner of decadence or naturalism, dominant literary models in late nineteenth-century Latin America, the novels end with madness or the death of the protagonist. Along these lines, the dissolute protagonist of Cambaceres's *Sin rumbo* memorably disembowels himself at his estancia, flinging his excrement onto the walls.

What separates *Raucho* from previous naturalist and decadent narratives of dissolute oligarchic youth, however, is precisely its attempt to forge a solution to the crisis facing the export-oriented landed class. This move is by no means subtle: In a chapter bearing the title "Solution," another Argentine heir rescues Raucho from the Swiss sanatorium, pays his debts, and brings him home to Argentina. On his friend's ranch, far from the corruption of Europe and the contaminating presence of luxury and women, he is able to fulfill the desire that had suddenly manifested itself during his European illness: to embrace a gaucho.[13] With this literal and figurative embrace, Raucho unlocks a kind of homonational mysticism through which he can cleanse himself of feminizing and foreign "dust" and begin anew (255). Earlier in the novel, the gauchos of Raucho's childhood had been depicted as ranch hands whose days of epic grandeur had given way—with the very processes of enclosure narrated by poems such as José Hernández's

Martín Fierro—to waged work and a life of "comforts" (13). But when called upon as a solution to the landowner crisis, the gaucho reacquires his lost mythical potential, this time as an abstract, nameless entity. This reconstituted myth in turn allows the landowner to disavow the foreign market that had corrupted him and return home to a newly spiritualized countryside. At the end of the novel, Raucho resolves to stay at his friend's ranch, "even as a peon" (255). As a final image, he lays down, his arms outstretched in the shape of a cross under the wide-open pampa, melding with the elements but also transubstantiating into a mystical cipher for the land itself. With this resolution, the principle of reality that almost destroyed the protagonist is abandoned for the wish fulfillment of romance.

Romance had long been a prominent narrative mode in Latin American narrative. A key form for Latin America's landed elite, it had enjoyed wide appeal in the post-independence period, until it was overtaken by naturalism and decadence in the late nineteenth century (as in the aforementioned "narrative of dissolute oligarchic youth"). As Doris Sommer argues in her classic study of nineteenth-century national allegory, romance held special appeal because it allowed authors to imagine symbolic resolutions to political problems in the post-independence period, ranging from ongoing civil war and the abolition of slavery to, we can add, the grave distortions of neocolonial economic dependency.[14] In *Raucho*, romance reemerges from the ashes of decadence and naturalism as a last-ditch effort to resolve a crisis, but with new contours. Nineteenth-century romances had most often been couched in terms of heterosexual love matches, an aspect Sommer reads as symbolically uniting different factions along lines of class and race. But such coupling disappears entirely in *Raucho*, to no small degree because the novel had aligned women themselves with the corrosive aspects of an enervating and debilitating world market. In addition to losing his capacity for reproduction, Raucho also seems to have lost his claim on property. And if this loss constitutes, as we'll see it does, a new problem for ruling-class ideology, it is a temporary solution insofar as it allows the novel to envision the large estate—once a site of speculation, rent collection, and the like—as a site of spiritual regeneration. This loss also allows Güiraldes to imagine the (former) landowner as a morally upright and independent son of the nation.

And yet, this solution is incomplete: The heir has regained his soul but at the cost of relinquishing his property. What was needed was an aesthetic

mechanism that could spiritualize the Argentine soil while maintaining its status as private property. This is precisely the solution Güiraldes offers in his most famous novel, *Don Segundo Sombra*. If in *Raucho* the landowner regenerated himself through an embrace with a gaucho, in *Don Segundo Sombra* he becomes a gaucho, if only so that he can become a landowner once more. Like *Raucho*, *Don Segundo Sombra* takes the form of a bildungsroman, but this time the action of the novel will studiously avoid both Europe and Buenos Aires to stage a journey across the Argentine plains. It will also studiously avoid, until its final pages, oligarchic characters like Raucho to focus instead on two popular characters: first, a mestizo orphan (*guacho*), later identified as Fabio, who escapes from the strictures of provincial life in a town with his aunts to roam the plains; and second, the eponymous Don Segundo, an old gaucho who becomes the boy's mentor. The novel is told from the first-person perspective of Fabio, now in middle age, as he remembers his walk about the pampa with Don Segundo over the span of five years. The narrative, episodic in quality, alternates between the description of the prosaic but noble task of cattle herding and existential musings about fate, hardship, and death. In comparison with *Raucho*, there is notably little in the way of plot tension: While the boy and Don Segundo meet different characters or attend cockfights, forward-moving narrative is subordinated to lyrical description of the landscape and labors of the gaucho. Work itself becomes like a dream, as when, at the end of a particularly exhausting day, the narrator relates: "Later your ideas, as well as your actions, keep getting confused in an unreality that parades roughly by, as you pay only casual attention. In the end, there's no vital capacity left except to do what you propose to do without flagging: to go on forever" (185). As an extension of this dream-like temporality, nature acquires its own spare beauty: In one instance, for example, a moving herd of cattle is described as breaking "into small clusters, like a chunk of limestone crumbling in the water" (182). The simultaneously elemental and spiritual quality of the landscape extends to the novel's title character, whose "bulky and leathery" (14) hands and craggy face identify him as a real being, just as the word *sombra* alludes to his ethereal presence as a shadow.

Since the novel's publication, critics have noted the pains this novel takes to evoke a hazy, indeterminate past, carefully scrubbed of historical referents. It's important to mention in this regard that the gaucho in *Don*

Segundo Sombra is a self-consciously constructed anachronism. As Güiraldes's earlier novel *Raucho* had already revealed, the epic era of the gaucho had been ended by enclosure and export agriculture. In *Don Segundo Sombra*, though, the gaucho is allowed to roam the pampa again. In similar manner, Güiraldes evokes a countryside that is pacified, but also somehow anterior to the capitalist order that this pacification called forth. Güiraldes's friend Jorge Luis Borges was perhaps the first to notice this contradiction, wryly noting that Fabio and Don Segundo walk about the pampa for five years without ever seeming to encounter a fence or immigrant tenant farmer.[15] This is especially noteworthy because the Argentine countryside was at the time one of the most enclosed in the world. And as the critic Beatriz Sarlo notes, cattle in the novel still have long horns, which had been cut off decades earlier so that they could better fit into train cars.[16]

But it isn't just the connection of the pampa to the global market that the novel seeks to suppress; at least initially, the novel also seeks to suppress property and class as structuring instances of Argentine society. Even though specific ranches are named (belonging to well-known families like the Anchorenas and Ocampos), the overall impression is one of an uninterrupted landscape, traversed freely by the main characters. As Carlos Alonso notes, Fabio and his gaucho mentor don't so much work as perform an endless stream of "activity."[17] With their commodity-character suppressed, land and labor become sites of spiritual regeneration available to everyone. This, at least, is how Güiraldes saw it when he responded to a questionnaire in the literary journal *Martín Fierro* in 1924, on whether national character existed: "Yes, there is an Argentine sensibility and an Argentine mentality. If that were not the case, we would have no reason for being except as fallow land, ready to be sold by the lot."[18] But from the perspective of the world market—not to mention from the perspective of the country's landed class—this was exactly what Argentina was: a collection of parcels to be bought and sold by the lot, in the service of producing commodities for the global market. For the budding nationalist writer, however, assailed by the crisis of this neocolonial economic model, Argentina was something else: the site of a brotherly communion that belonged to *all* Argentines, regardless of class or status.

At first glance, *Don Segundo Sombra* goes even further than *Raucho* in disavowing private property in favor of a decommodified and spiritualized

national landscape. But after two hundred pages of leisurely wandering that never seems to end, the novel introduces a sudden and jarring plot twist that restores property to its rightful role as the regulating mechanism of Argentine society. With only three chapters remaining, the boy receives a letter informing him that the man he assumed to be his benefactor, Don Fabio Cáceres, was in fact his father, who upon his death has left him his last name and property. In the instant he inherits property, the boy acquires a new personhood, that of the legitimate son and landowner. As a result, he immediately acquires a new perspective: "The countryside, everything, seemed different to me now. I was looking out from inside another person" (189). With this sudden change in status and worldview, the boy's journey must conclude. In the final two chapters, he undertakes a second but no less important apprenticeship as a landowner, this time under the tutelage of two characters who had appeared in Güiraldes's first novel, the landowner Leandro and his son Raucho. Notably, Leandro and Raucho bear no trace of the crises they had weathered in the previous novel: Leandro is a stolid agrarian bourgeois, and Raucho is his responsible helpmate. The entry of these two characters, in turn, signals a new temporal principle organizing the novel. In contrast with the leisurely pace of the earlier chapters, which really did seem as if they might go on forever, the last two chapters of *Don Segundo Sombra* speed up to recount how Fabio learns accounting, literature, and estate management from his new mentors. As the culmination of this second apprenticeship, Fabio understands that he must bid a painful farewell to the gaucho Don Segundo, who literally rides off into the sunset at the end of the novel.

The ideological tenor of this resolution is clear enough: Learning to love the land as a gaucho becomes the ultimate justification for its ownership. This is the fantasy, as David Viñas memorably puts it, of "an intellectual who loves the countryside without limits, but who is historically and concretely the owner of a ranch enclosed by wire fences, dogs, and work schedules."[19] What needs further explanation, though, are the rather bizarre textual maneuvers that become necessary to such a resolution, even at the cost of the novel's carefully constructed aesthetic unity. The earlier parts of *Don Segundo Sombra*, although based on historical suppressions, were internally cohesive in aesthetic terms. But the windfall inheritance plot breaks this cohesion with the sudden transformation of its gaucho apprentice into a landowner. After keeping property at bay for most of the

novel, it suddenly returns, like the repressed, to acquire a place of dominance in the narrative. In this, the novel reveals against the grain of its own aesthetic code that the true force moving Argentine societies was not a patriotic love of the "land," but private property in the hands of a single landowner.

The sudden appearance of the inheritance plot marks a hard limit to the idealism on display in previous pages by way of an external force that fundamentally alters the protagonist's trajectory. After inheriting the estate, the narrator cannot continue as an apprentice to the gaucho, but is instead forced to become something else, a landowner. And yet this resolution, while recognizing external reality, is not itself realist, because it subordinates material exigency to the romance of just rewards: Land happily ends up in the hands of one who loves and knows it the best. If Güiraldes's previous novel, *Raucho*, employs a mode of high romance in which the landowner loses his property but gains his soul, *Don Segundo Sombra* employs a lower form of romance, melodrama, to return land to the landowner once more.

From an aesthetic perspective, the melodramatic register that concludes the novel is jarring, to say the least, especially in its substitution of a spiritually disinterested masculine aesthetic with one long associated with women and commercial society (even as women remain conspicuously absent from the narrative). While perhaps not a conscious authorial choice, the formal break in the narrative—in which the story of the gaucho's apprentice splits off from that of a newly minted landowner—alerts us to a contradiction in need of suturing. In this manner, the inheritance plot runs like an invisible fence through the text, one that ultimately does not fuse but divides owners from non-owners. The novel's function, as romance, is to conceal this division, just as the formal break announces the irreducible antagonism that called forth the need for romance in the first place. The fact that this antagonism does not announce itself plainly, but instead appears on the level of the novel's innermost composition, attests to its necessity, at least from the perspective of the propertied class. The landowner and gaucho, after fusing, must separate from one another once again, like wheat from the chaff.

Notably, in this regard, this separation is carried out with some help from foreign literary sources, in what amounts to a final appeal to the same regulating principle that Güiraldes's literary project had tried to avoid at

every turn: the global market. To make this argument, we can note that the novel's resolution—the revelation of the orphan's true status as heir to an estate—is not typical within Güiraldes's Argentine literary sources. It does not appear in the gauchesco, which usually ends with the confinement or conscription of the gaucho, and it certainly does not appear in earlier romance or naturalist novels, which frequently end with the destruction of the male protagonist. Here we might think of the exploding *unitario* at the end of Esteban Echevarría's *El matadero* (*The Slaughter Yard*, 1871), the murdered protagonist of José Mármol's *Amalia* (1851), or the self-disemboweled landowner of Cambaceres's *Sin rumbo*. But this resolution was common in English Victorian novels such as Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838), surely familiar to Güiraldes, in a mechanism widely known as the inheritance plot.[20]

Such literary borrowings happen all the time in peripheral contexts, and on its own this one is not remarkable. What is remarkable, however, is the extent to which a Victorian plot swoops in to set the Argentine novel on its proper class footing, almost as if Güiraldes couldn't count on national mechanisms, much less the gaucho's self-determination, to do so on their own. If the gauchesco genre moves the nationalist writer toward Argentina, the Victorian plot twist fittingly drives him back toward England once more. Put differently, if the lyrical-nationalist plot suppresses Argentina's true character as a commodity enclave governed by a global market centered in England, the Victorian inheritance plot reinstates this external market as a higher regulating power. The "god" in the novel's deus ex machina is, from this perspective, perhaps nothing other than the global market; the "machine" is, of course, English. Upon closer inspection, the interjection of this jarring plot twist is akin to what Roberto Schwarz, in a different context, has named "the local and opaque effect of a planetary mechanism."[21] But if the admittance of a planetary regulating principle by way of the Victorian inheritance plot signals an admission of defeat for the nationalist writer, it offers some comfort to the landowner residing within him. After walking about the pampa for five years, it allows him to find his true home again, not just in the world market but in Argentine class society. In some manner, the deep regulating principles of informal empire liberate the landowner from promises made in the heat of a nationalist embrace with the gaucho.

More than any representation of the plain or the gaucho, perhaps what is most "Argentine" about this novel is the inevitable return of the peripheral bourgeois, dressed up as a gaucho, to the fold of private property and empire. Here we might recall Borges's famous proclamation—made as a rejoinder to regionalists like Güiraldes—that the Argentine author need not wear local color on his sleeve to be counted as national: "What is truly native can and does often dispense with local color."[22] The same holds true for *Don Segundo Sombra*, though perhaps not in the way Borges imagined: The restoration of property to a "legitimate" heir turns out to have an even more deeply national resonance than any walk about the pampa. To adapt the words of Schwarz once more, we might say that the visual imagery of *Don Segundo Sombra* focuses on "the country of our hearts" (in which everyone is equal, nothing is commodified, and spiritual values abound), while its resolution cannot help but thrust us back into "the real country of social classes."[23]

And this real country of social classes is, of course, not constituted by a loving embrace between landowner and gaucho, or between owners and non-owners, but by a permanent antagonism between them. So long as this antagonism exists, there can be no nation, at least as Güiraldes imagined it in his more mystical moments. Most of the time, the existence of this antagonism is suppressed. In at least one instance, however, it comes bubbling to the surface, to reveal the bitter class divisions at the heart of Argentine society. Immediately after learning he has inherited property, Fabio briefly fantasizes about refusing the inheritance and dividing the estate among the landless poor: "I pictured myself on my estate with a lawyer, dictating my proposal to make mincemeat of those lands, so I could divide them up among the poor" (191). For a moment, he seems to behave according to his previous training, in line with the communal, brotherly ways he had been taught by the gaucho. Such an impulse was also in tune with the increasingly militant organization that roiled the Argentine countryside beginning with the 1912 Alacorta strike, when thousands of immigrant tenant farmers withheld harvests to protest their exploitation by large landowners. With these strikes, land reform became a serious proposition in Argentina for the first time.[24] In *Don Segundo Sombra*, however, the prospect of dividing up the estate is quickly discarded with the embarrassed rejoinder, "Thank God, I tired of such exercises" (191). In the space of a single sentence, as if with an inaudible shudder, the young heir

decides that the large estate must prevail. Though the narrator does not stop to articulate why this should be the case, the novel's previous sections provide an aesthetic argument: Properties divided into "mincemeat" could never approach the grandeur invoked in the novel's earlier approach to the Argentine landscape, which might only be preserved in the form of estates so large they become confused with nature itself. In this manner, the two competing parts of the novel complement each other as two sides of the same class apology.

In one sense, the apology comes late: By the 1930s, national industry had come to supplant agricultural exports as the country's main node of accumulation, a role it would occupy until late in the twentieth century.[25] In another sense, however, the resolution of *Don Segundo Sombra* is future-oriented, insofar as it projects a narrative of regeneration for a landed class that would remain economically and politically powerful throughout the twentieth century. This regeneration passes through Fabio, a mestizo orphan whose rise to join the ranks of the propertied makes a paltry offering to class mobility. His transformation into a landowner demands, however, that he relinquish his gaucho ways and become an agrarian bourgeois. As Franco Moretti has shown, the resolution of the European bildungsroman demands that the dynamism of youth be relinquished, painfully, in exchange for the stability of adulthood in bourgeois society.[26] In *Don Segundo Sombra*, Fabio accepts this compromise when he is forced to say goodbye to his gaucho mentor. He looks at his watch ("It was five o-clock" [202]), as if in recognition of a new regulatory force in his life. As Don Segundo rides away, Fabio feels the loss "like someone who is bleeding to death" (204). But if the surrender of youthful freedom and mobility is the locus classicus of the European bildungsroman, Güiraldes's novel asserts a peripheral inflection that is at once comical and serious. In the time-honored manner of Latin American elites, the propertied youth gets to have things both ways: He inherits an enormous estate, while at the same time experiencing that inheritance as a noble sacrifice. At the same time, he gets to become a bourgeois who is national in feeling, if not in actual orientation.

With this, we can see that the reactionary character of the Argentine landed class was not a leftover of some archaic past, but an up-to-date expression of class rule in an enclave of the global market. Here we can return once more to Güiraldes's dedication of his novel to the gaucho who

resides within himself “as the monstrance bears the host,” a religious metaphor that invokes the gaucho as a sacred essence held within the body of the writer. But just as *Don Segundo Sombra* ultimately relinquishes its spiritualist speculations in favor of material necessity, we might literalize this religious metaphor to see the landowner for what he really is: not a monstrance guarding a sacred host, but a vampire who, after sucking the vital forces from the gaucho, transforms him into a ghostly referent for landowner legitimacy. If this marks a national vision, it is a quite regressive one indeed, one that only a landowner might conceive. Along these lines, we can think of nineteenth-century European vampire narratives that inevitably revolve around landowners as an archaic social power in a bourgeois world. Closer to home, Latin American peasants and indigenous communities have frequently cast the landowner in similarly vampiric terms, as is the case of the *naqaq* in Peru. Even though an industrial bourgeoisie would eventually succeed in displacing the Argentine landed class, and a robust domestic market would succeed, at least for a time, in subduing the whims of the global export market, private property would remain the unyielding cornerstone of the nation-state. It is perhaps in this allegiance to property, more than in any appeal to autochthony, that *Don Segundo Sombra’s* relevance lies today.

Junker Realism and Cacique Romance

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Argentina had the most developed and highly capitalized agrarian sector in Latin America. The problem of the latifundio was thus not so much its productivity as its dependency on foreign markets and, as a result, high instability. A different picture emerges when we turn to other sites on the continent, where the problem of the large estate was its isolation from markets, low capitalization, and lack of productivity. This was the kind of estate that a growing chorus of commentators would describe as “feudal,” a term that, while historically inaccurate (because no Latin American estate merely replicated the structures of European feudalism), sought to capture its backward and archaic character. Much more than highly developed estancias or sugar plantations, this was the kind of large estate that drove discussions of the agrarian question in the twentieth century.

In the realm of the novel, Rómulo Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara* made a fundamental and lasting contribution to these debates by placing the backward latifundio at the center of its famous inquiry into the battle between civilization and barbarism in Venezuela. The novel tells the story of a citified landowner who returns to his ancestral estate in the remote plains of Venezuela to discover that, in his absence, an evil and witchlike woman, the title character, has usurped portions of his patrimony and subjected the plains to a lawless "barbarism." Over the course of the novel, Santos Luzardo will fight to transform his backward estate into a more productive and "civilized" entity. Already we can note that the novel toggles back and forth between real-world specificity—the plains of Venezuela—and allegorical representation. Doña Bárbara, as her name suggests, stands for the forces of barbarism: Some of her habits include consulting blood-drinking birds to make decisions, burying her money in a hole in the ground, and accumulating vast tracts of land so as to find herself "in the middle of my property, wherever I should be" (159). Her sidekick, "Mr. Danger," an Alaskan miner, in turn, stands for rising US imperialism. Doña Bárbara's daughter Marisela, alternately referred to as a "sleeping beauty" and compared to a domesticated mare, stands for the Venezuelan masses. And Santos Luzardo, as his name suggests, stands for enlightenment and civilization as he sets out to eradicate what the narrator calls "the forces which were holding back the Plain" (29).

Doña Bárbara's structure reveals strong ties to the nineteenth-century tradition of national romance studied by Doris Sommer, wherein characters in novels like Jorge Isaacs's *María* (Colombia, 1867) or Cirilio Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés* (Cuba, 1882) allegorized national conflicts along lines of class, gender, and race. But if *Doña Bárbara* is the last great nineteenth-century national romance, it is also very much a novel that posits and attempts to solve specifically twentieth-century problems, which were, on a deep level, agrarian problems. This is especially true with respect to the novel's attempt to imagine a course away from export dependency and toward a domestic market. The closest historical referent for Gallegos's allegory was the oligarchic regime of Juan Vicente Gómez (1908–35), a familiar type of oligarchic autocrat in turn-of-the-century Latin America who suppressed dissent at home while opening the country to foreign economic interests. Gómez presided over the discovery and rise of oil in Venezuela and infamously let US corporations write the legislation. He also

accumulated and distributed vast landholdings to his cronies, transforming the country's interiors into a huge cattle-walk. Estates could be as large as 10,000 hectares, or 100 square kilometers.[27] In response to the Gómez regime, *Doña Bárbara* attempts to locate a path out of imperialism and *latifundismo* and toward a domestic market whose ground zero necessarily passed through agriculture.

Doña Bárbara was published in 1929, the year historians mark as auguring a new phase of inward-oriented capital accumulation in Latin America. This shift, in turn, is announced in the spatio-temporal lineaments of the novel. A brief comparison is illustrative in this regard: Jorge Isaacs's novel *María*, like Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara*, opens as a male protagonist returns to his ancestral estate after completing his studies in the capital city. Halfway through Isaacs's novel, however, the protagonist is abruptly sent by his father to England for further study, a dislocation that precipitates the tragic death of his cousin and love interest, the eponymous María. In *Doña Bárbara*, by contrast, the pull of the global market seems attenuated, not least because Efraín stays in the plains region for the duration of the novel, where he begins an ambitious, though ultimately failed, attempt to become a nationally oriented bourgeois.

The importance of the move from an export-led to a national economy cannot be overstated. Export production would remain the main motor of peripheral economies: Oil—the commodity that would come to define the twentieth century in Venezuela—serves as a particularly dramatic reminder of this fact. This should not obscure the fact, however, that the substitution of imported goods for nationally produced ones emerged as a key demand of reformers from the 1930s onward. In Venezuela, the reform project was led by Acción Democrática, the mass populist and anticommunist party founded by Rómulo Betancourt. Gallegos actively participated in this party as an intellectual and—for a brief nine months in 1948—president of Venezuela, before he was deposed by a military coup. Gallegos's attempt to imagine national economic development in turn guides his most famous novel. As John Beverly puts it, *Doña Bárbara* was the "founding text" of Acción Democrática, in that it proposed a new alliance between a "progressive national bourgeoisie and peasantry."[28] Along similar lines, Julie Skurski notes that the character Santos Luzardo inspired generations of reformers and even communists, not just in Venezuela, but across Latin America.[29]

And yet, contrary to this reputation, Santos never fulfills his mission as a progressive bourgeois in *Doña Bárbara*. As Howard Sabin notes, Gallegos himself did not favor the breakup of large estates but their modernization along the lines of what Lenin termed a Junker road in reference to modernizing Prussian landlords.[30] But—and this is key to my reading of the novel—Santos is wholly unable to succeed as a modernizing landowner: All of his plans to improve the estate fail, and miserably so. The Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier was perhaps the first to notice this contradiction. Speaking of the resolution of the novel, in which Santos marries Marisela, thus regaining all the property lost to Doña Bárbara, Carpentier writes: "Has there been any progress? No. The former property of the Luzardos returns to its original boundaries; the owner goes back to the manor and the only progress that has come with Santos Luzardo from the University of Caracas is a spool of barbed wire."[31] A novel that begins by promising something like a bourgeois revolution on the Venezuelan plains thus ends up with a restoration of the same forces it had set out to defeat, albeit dressed in bourgeois clothing. It is not enough, however, to note that the novel ends up restoring what it seemingly fought against; we must instead explain how and why it can't succeed on its own terms.

For Lenin, a "road" to capitalism is forged when a specific tendency becomes dominant, at the cost of others. *Doña Bárbara* models one path, that of the modernizing bourgeois landowner, but the novel can't take that path; instead, it is forced to take another, much more conservative and archaic road. The novel is itself deeply concerned with the notion of the path or road (*camino*), a word that appears thirty-four times in the text. At times, this term is used literally; at others, however, it appears to mark a decisive turn in a character's direction within the text. Santos Luzardo, for example, announces at a key juncture in the novel's action: "I mean that we are taking another road" (353). In another instance, Doña Bárbara imagines what her life would look like had it taken a path "different from that she had hitherto traversed" (427). The novel is equally concerned with blockages and limits to these paths, as metaphorized by dried riverbeds where water ceases to flow and by a morass where animals sink to their death.

This opening and foreclosure of different paths is best tracked on the level of the novel's form, specifically as an oscillation between a realist register dedicated to evoking the unique reality of the plains and a mode of romance that reduces that reality to a quasi-magical fight between good and

evil. While a tension between romance and realism is, to be sure, not unique to *Doña Bárbara*, but characteristic of nineteenth-century national allegories in general, it takes on special significance in this novel's attempt to map a road to capitalism in Venezuela.

As a first approximation of this tension between romance and realism, we can note how the allegorical function of the two main characters always operates within a specific historical milieu that exceeds their intended meaning. Santos, for example, is identified, on an allegorical plane, with the forces of civilization; at the same time, however, he is linked to a violent past by way of his family. An early chapter, dense with historical signification, narrates the original founding of the estate by Santos's remote ancestors, who dispossessed and murdered the region's indigenous inhabitants. According to local oral legend, an indigenous chief cursed a strip of land known as the Palmar de la Chusmita, the same strip of land that later sparked a devastating feud between two branches of the family, the Luzardos and the Barqueros. The novel's attempt to register oral legend as a marker of history is important; indeed, regionalism inaugurates a mode we might call the oral legend of primitive accumulation that will be employed by agrarian novels studied throughout this book, as a means of narrating history from below. In its early instantiation in *Doña Bárbara*, oral legend identifies the landed family itself as an original site of barbarism. The curse opens onto the permanent infighting among the two branches of the Luzardo family: For generations, Luzardos and Banqueros have killed each other senselessly. In the latest chapter of this feud, Santos's father killed his older brother, an act of filicide that prompted Santos's mother to remove him to Caracas. Upon returning to his land, he removes the lance head his father placed there twenty-five years ago, a symbolic act that pretends to set the family on the course of civilization.

Given his family's sordid and violent past, Santos Luzardo might not be the first choice to lead a bourgeois revolution on the plains. But, as the novel takes pains to show, he is the only choice given the monstrosity of Doña Bárbara. Allegorically speaking, the latter character functions as the feminine and mestiza inversion of Santos, the negative example against which bourgeois civilization can be measured. Each arrives in turn on the plains from an inverted location: Santos from the capital city, Caracas, and Doña Bárbara from the farthest reaches of the Amazon jungle, topos of barbarism par excellence for nineteenth-century Latin American elites.

Again, a crucial historical detail emerges that disturbs the neatness of this allegory. Doña Bárbara, we learn, hails from the Amazon basin of the rubber boom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the daughter of an indigenous woman raped by a white trader. The young Bárbara (Barbarita) fell in love with a man, Asdrúbal, who taught her to read, thereby placing her on what the novel clearly considers a path to civilization. This trajectory is dramatically cut short, however, when Asdrúbal is killed and Barbarita horrifically gang-raped by a group of rubber traders. The novel inscribes the rapes of Doña Bárbara and her mother within a particularly brutal history of accumulation in Latin America, when demand for rubber on the world market sparked by mass automobile production led to the enslavement by rubber traders and near extinction of indigenous tribes in the Amazon. And so if Bárbara functions as an allegory of barbarism, it is one borne directly of a bourgeois civilization that reproduces itself through rape and genocide. On the other hand, however, in keeping with the uneven tenor of the text, this history immediately collapses into and is occluded by an overtly colonial mode of romance, such as when the narrator locates Bárbara's birth in the "dramatic mystery of the virgin forests" (30).[32] As André Michalski has noted in a structuralist reading of the novel, modes of realism and romance alternately exert their presence in *Doña Bárbara*.[33]

But the coexistence of generic modes only gets us so far. In the spirit of Fredric Jameson's political unconscious, we would need to study how different generic modes interact to produce social meanings.[34] Specifically, the tension between realism and romance can reveal why a novel that begins by announcing a bourgeois revolution ends as a patriarchal restoration, with its most reactionary aspects not only intact, but intensified. As explored below, a realist (then naturalist) mode dooms Santos to failure as a modernizer; romance, however, allows him to win, but only by reasserting the hoariest and most reactionary aspects of patriarchal power.

Santos begins the novel as an absentee landowner living off the rents from an estate no one in generations has done anything to improve. In order to make him a viable alternative to Doña Bárbara, however, the novel reveals his fervent desire to shift course from his family history and modernize the plains. This modernizing plan is laid out in what I consider the most strongly realist section of the novel, which for sake of convenience I refer to as the dairy subplot. This subplot, faithfully revisited in each of

the novel's three sections, centers on Santos's attempt to improve the estate by starting a dairy farm. These are prosaic episodes, especially when measured against the monstrosity of Doña Bárbara or the mystical potential of gargantuan crocodiles, and perhaps why they are rarely discussed. But it is precisely their relative ordinariness and lack of allegorical excess that allow these scenes to reveal the stark limits of Santos Luzardos's attempt to transform the plains.

In the first of these scenes, a loyal peon, Antonio, gives the recently arrived Santos a tour of the estate, Altamira, suggesting that the heir bring back the dairy farms that once produced cheese and milk. Such an improvement would have the benefit, the peon notes, of taming the Luzardo cattle and making them less susceptible to rustling by Doña Bárbara. Santos, inspired by this suggestion, immediately imagines something much greater: the enclosure of the entire estate with barbed-wire fences and—in a flight of fancy—the unspooling of railroads across the plain. "Suddenly, the dreamer, as if actually tricked by the illusion, or else deliberately indulging his fancy, exclaimed: 'The train! There goes the train!'" (138). Nineteenth-century Latin American novels and essays are full of such fantasies of commercial progress. Elsewhere I have called this mode "export reverie," because it almost inevitably oriented itself toward export markets, with authors swooning over the productive potential of coffee or banana plantations.[35] In keeping with the broad historical shift to which twentieth-century regionalism responds, however, Santos fantasizes about dairy, a product for local consumption oriented toward the internal market. Lenin, along these lines, had singled out dairy farming as a means of diversifying production and subordinating one product to others to signal a "a complete revolution in agriculture."[36] Closer to Gallegos's context, Acosta Saignes's 1937 text *El latifundio* maintained that dairy farming on Venezuela's immense cattle estates promised more efficient and integrated agricultural production for the home market.[37]

Even when it sparks a dream vision, the improvement plot is firmly grounded in a realist register. First, the dairy subplot is one of the least allegory-driven parts of the novel. In it, Santos engages only with characters like Antonio who, in contrast with Doña Bárbara or Mr. Danger, carry no additional allegorical meaning. Even more fundamentally, however, the subplot rehearses a central problematic of classic (European) realism: the failure of the individual to realize his or her dreams in the world of reality.

And indeed, Santos Luzardo is wholly unable to realize his dairy dreams. To underscore this failure, the novel returns faithfully to the subplot in its subsequent two sections. In part 2, Santos becomes bitterly disillusioned when he sees the rudimentary dairy an itinerant cheesemaker has built in the same place where a nearly identical construction had existed decades earlier. With this, Santos realizes that he will never be able to found a "modern establishment … equipped with all the improvements of the cattle industry in civilized countries" (286). His hopes, so exuberant in the first section, have almost just as quickly been dashed by the dense material reality of the plains. With some petulance, Santos tells the peon Antonio that all his efforts have been in vain: "That's what my forefathers did and that's what I'll do too, because this land is a grindstone that dulls the edge of the hardest-tempered will" (286).

This movement is cemented in the third section, when a puma kills the cheesemaker's grandson, to defeat Santos's dairy project definitively. Teetering into a naturalist register, Santos reasons that the plains are simply too savage to sustain his projects. With this, he understands that "there was no dream now, there was only cruel and implacable reality" (321). If this cruel and implacable reality were left unchecked in *Doña Bárbara*, we might expect to witness the utter defeat of Santos by the end of the novel. For if this were a truly realist novel, the failed landowner would most likely be defeated by debts, and/or an upwardly mobile peasant, as in José Lins do Rego's *Bângüe*, considered in the next chapter. Or if this were truly a naturalist novel, Santos might be swallowed by an anaconda or killed by one of Doña Bárbara's minions. This is indeed the path taken by another foundational regionalist novel, the Chilean author Mariano Latorre's *Zurzulita*, in which an idealistic young landowner is killed by a rich peasant, his body left to rot in the forest. But instead, Santos emerges triumphant: By the end of the novel, he ejects Doña Bárbara peacefully, marries her daughter, and, as a result, reconstitutes his ancestral estate. As a side benefit, Mr. Danger, the representative of the feudal-imperial alliance, leaves the plains of his own accord. In order for this triumph to occur in the aftermath of Santos's failure to improve his estate, however, some principle *other than reality* has to intervene: romance; or more specifically the romance of the *cacique* (strongman).

This principle first asserts itself through the emergence of an extractive project that essentially replaces Santos's improvement plan. In the second

section of the novel, immediately after Santos expresses dismay at his inability to create a modern, more productive farm, the omniscient narrator suddenly turns to describe peons setting out at dawn to collect heron feathers in a crocodile-infested lagoon: “At dawn the collecting began. The pickers start out in canoes, but end up by jumping into the water; up to their waists in it, they defy death in a dozen hidden forms, shouting and singing, for the Plainsman never works in silence. If he does not yell, he sings” (293). During the time of the novel’s action, heron feathers were a commodity in high demand on the global market for women’s hats, the harvesting of which nearly led to the extinction of the birds. What is remarkable here, though, is the irruption of romance to depict feather collection as heroic and death-defying. The poetic appeal of this register, however, hides the fact that feather collection marks a regression of sorts, from a future-oriented plan to improve agricultural production for the internal market back to a dominant mode of export-driven extraction. In the aftermath of the novel’s failure to imagine the bases for a domestic market, the extractive sector reasserts itself. In a manner similar to the irruption of property in *Don Segundo Sombra*, the export economy returns to a place of dominance in the narrative, as indeed it would throughout the twentieth century in Venezuela, with oil in a starring role. As if to highlight the impersonal nature of this mechanism, Santos is nowhere to be found in the collection of heron feathers. This absence is notable because, as we later learn, the feathers allow Santos to buy the spools of barbed wire he uses to enclose his (still unproductive) estate. The turn back to export extraction, that is, occurs behind his back, seemingly independently of his will. With this, an incipient strand of Junker realism cedes to the romance of the rentier.

But the compensatory function of romance, together with its affirmation of regressive principles, reaches its maximum expression in the allegorical love triangle between Santos Luzardo, Doña Bárbara, and her adolescent daughter Marisela. With this triangle, the novel shifts ground away from reality and toward allegory: Santos is no longer an individual facing cruel and implacable material conditions, but an allegorical character who interacts with other allegorical characters in a fight between good and evil. Moreover, the triangle shifts terrain from Santos’s unsuccessful attempt to transform society to his successful attempt to dominate two women. What Santos can’t accomplish as a modernizer is thus overcome with a magical

phallic power accorded to men, and, more specifically, white, propertied men.

This solution is revealed in a pivotal scene in the novel's second part, dedicated to the yearly cattle roundup, during which Santos encounters Doña Bárbara and her minions on the open plain. In the course of a cattle stampede, Santos, suddenly "overtaken by the plainsman's instincts," lassoes the bull and orders it castrated on the spot. The narrator notes that even though Doña Bárbara knows how to lasso and castrate a bull with even greater skill, seeing Santos do it returns her to what the novel suggests is her proper place as a woman. "She was just a woman who had witnessed an interesting man's accomplishment" (171). In direct contrast with the scenes in which Santos tries to refound the dairy, he does not need to plan or think. Instead, drawing from instinct and muscle memory, he acts. It is obvious to see, especially given the novel's penchant for allegorizing people through animals, that Santos does not only prepare a bull for castration; symbolically, he castrates the castrating female figure, the so-called "devourer of men," and returns her to her rightful place as a woman. Earlier, Santos had fashioned himself as a rational and superior economic force vis-à-vis the money-burying Doña Bárbara, a woman the narrator characterizes as "incapable of conceiving a real plan" (163). But, given that Santos can't beat Doña Bárbara as an economic force, he is left with confronting her as a superior masculine force which, while coded as instinctual and therefore natural, is nothing more than the expression of his social power as a landed patriarch. We are far from the modernizing Junker path he set out on in the dairy subplot. Instead, as Santos says at one point: "We are taking another road" (353). This road legitimizes itself not on the basis of productivity but by way of an irresistible patriarchal power.

As a mark of this irresistibility, Doña Bárbara doesn't fight her transformation into a "mere woman." Instead, as if by some mysterious necromancy of the phallus, she becomes more and more feminine, sheds her sexuality (she is in her forties, after all, the narrator keeps reminding us, and nearing the point of decrepitude), and rediscovers a maternal instinct for her daughter Marisela. Realizing that Santos will never love her, she voluntarily slinks away in the third part of the novel, leaving her estate to her adolescent daughter, who upon marrying Santos transfers it back to him. Mr. Danger, a kind of metonymic extension of Doña Bárbara, likewise voluntarily leaves the region. At least one critic has complained that this

operation is beyond silly, even as romance. For at the same moment in which the narrative tension brings hero and heroine toward a "deadly encounter," Gallegos suddenly makes Doña Bárbara submit to Santos, "with the passivity and nuzzles of a lap dog."[38] I am less concerned with the fact that this flaw exists than I am with what it accomplishes: namely, the grounds upon which Santos—as both man and patriarch—can triumph over so-called barbarism.

A similar function of romance reveals itself in Santos's relationship to Doña Bárbara's adolescent daughter Marisela, whom he molds into a model of bourgeois womanhood. He teaches her to speak proper Spanish and to read; he also teaches her to stay at home and not run, as she is wont to do, through the brush. With this, he enacts a miniature process of enclosure whose historic origins, Silvia Federici and Maria Mies have shown, lie in the domestication of women.[39] No wonder, then, that Santos refers to his tutelage of Marisela as "his real accomplishment" (413). In reality, his marriage to Marisela is his *only* real accomplishment, because it is what allows him to reconstitute the original Luzardo-Barquero estate. This language of restoration is on full display in the novel's final words, which announce, in the manner of a fairy tale, that "all the lands once more became known as Altamira" (440).

But Santos Luzardo's apparent victory is, by the very terms established by Gallegos's novel, necessarily also a failure. This is because, at least on material grounds, the problem of the latifundio has not been solved: Santos's estate is scarcely more productive than Doña Bárbara's. It has simply reverted to its original owners and been enclosed in a barbed-wire fence. Moreover, Santos is no longer the purposive, transformative character he set out to be. Instead, he is a figure who allows instinct and muscle memory to course through him, seemingly beyond his will, as in his tacit acceptance that extraction for export will replace dairy production on the estate. In short, he is a character who is unable to accomplish anything except returning things to the way they were before the arrival of the upstart in the region. Moreover, for all his puffing up by the narrator, Santos's patriarchal authority is generally weak. In a key scene, when Santos confronts Balbino Paiba over stolen heron feathers, El Pajarito (a peon) hides behind Santos and shoots Balbino to protect his master. Santos, who knows nothing of El Pajarito's actions, thinks the bullet came from his gun, and is distraught that he has fallen into "barbarism." Santos can only be

calmed when El Pajarito and Marisela explain that he had not actually discharged his gun. In this, the novel unwittingly reveals how patriarchal power functions: The patriarch thinks he is in complete control, but his whole reality is in fact organized by others.

All of this would be comical were it not for the hoary energies this face-saving operation releases. For in order for Santos to win, even as a weak patriarch, the novel is forced to give up on its dreams of bourgeois revolution and cede to the most reactionary forces imaginable*:* patriarchy, white supremacy, and hereditary property. As the narrator announces, "It was the beginning of a righteous lordship (*cacicazgo*)" (361). In contrast with Doña Bárbara's barbarous reign, Santos's lordship is "righteous," the novel tells us, but it is still a lordship. A landowner road to capitalism that begins by projecting a new day for the plains region ends up summoning the hoary energies of the past. From a formal perspective, this restoration must occur. The road Santos sets out on is, according to the inner organization of the novel, impossible. It is thus that a bourgeois project that cannot be completed in the realm of realism begets an archaic response in the realm of romance.

In broader terms, the reactionary resolution of *Doña Bárbara* is perhaps indicative of the inevitably conservative nature of bourgeois reformism itself in societies dominated by landed oligarchies like the Luzardos. Such an insight is not entirely new. In a foundational reading of Leo Tolstoy, Georg Lukács writes that a novel like *Anna Karenina* reveals a marked tendency in Russian society "not to destroy or eliminate the worst aspects of an autocracy already superseded by historical development but merely to adapt them to the requirements of capitalist interests."[40] One of Tolstoy's great contributions, Lukács writes, was to reveal that beneath its "polite and polished exterior," Russia's landed nobility was "a gang of vicious imbeciles," who "show an increasing resemblance … to the stinking Yahoos of Jonathan Swift."[41] Roberto Schwarz takes this analysis one step further to show, via analyses of Machado de Assis's nineteenth-century novels, how elite norms of bourgeois "civilization" in Brazil were always accompanied by regressive tendencies—most notably, an acceptance of slavery and patriarchalism as complements to the world market. With an irony similar to that Lukács identifies in Tolstoy, Machado de Assis reveals "the adaptability of civilization to purposes that read contrary to its very idea"; or, in other words, a form of regression that is not eliminated but

rather produced by a peripheral society's integration into the global market.[42]

Doña Bárbara similarly reveals regression as the counterpart to civilization, albeit in a less self-aware manner than either Tolstoy or Machado. In a certain respect, the novel provides insights into the devil's bargain of bourgeois reformism in twentieth-century Latin America, which has historically been characterized by support for reforms so long as they did not threaten class power, and retrenchment into regression as soon as they did. Ironically, this was the fate that awaited Gallegos himself as president of Venezuela: In 1948, after winning what is widely considered Venezuela's first truly free election, his mildly reformist government was ousted after a scant nine months by a military coup d'état. In the 1960s, Rómulo Betancourt would succeed in instituting a more ambitious set of reforms, including land reform, but it could not get rid of the latifundio.[43] Gallegos's novel, while not exactly predicting this outcome, does reveal just how quickly reaction closes in on any attempt at reform, *even* among bourgeois reformers themselves. And if Gallegos finds a way to celebrate this resolution in *Doña Bárbara*, it is perhaps a source of embarrassment as well. For no sooner does the novel settle on Santos Luzardo's regressive tactics than it asks the reader, politely, to forget it has done so. As Doña Bárbara slinks away, into an unknown fate, a disembodied voice whispers to her, "to be loved by a man like Santos Luzardo it's necessary to have no past" (428). This is surely meant to be read as a gendered coding of sexual virtue. Taken literally, however, it is an accurate description of the novel's chief accomplishment in the realm of aesthetic form: To forget that instead of a bourgeois revolution on the plains, all Santos Luzardo can offer is a restoration of hoary ancestral power. A future-oriented promise of productivity, in turn, relapses into an acceptance of land monopoly and rent extraction as the law of the plains, with no end in sight.

Against the grain of this neat closure, however, the novel provides some glimmer of the paths foreclosed on the road to patriarchal restoration. For even as the author makes Doña Bárbara accept the erasure of her own history, she briefly sees "the spectacle of herself in a way of life different from that she had hitherto traversed" (427). Gallegos surely meant to ask what might have happened had Doña Bárbara not become an evil, man-eating monster, but a docile and loving wife. But we might also ask: What if the novel itself had set her on a different path, directing her energies not

toward the center of a monstrous property regime, but toward its dissolution? Gallegos's commitment to private property as the only possible resolution to the agrarian question, even when it meant that land remained in the hands of the most reactionary forces imaginable, forecloses this question from the start. And yet its echoes haunt the text, especially in the form of the popular speech and legends that circulate within it. As an example, we have the words of the peon Antonio, who laconically punctures Santos's first dream of enclosure with the words: "The plainsman won't have fences" (137). The novel ultimately suppresses such traces of popular history with a ruling-class fairy tale, and yet its echoes perhaps constitute a utopian vision in which the expropriators might yet be expropriated.

Indeed, the social energies clamoring for an end to the large estate (and landed classes) would soon make the mode of landowner romance I have examined in this chapter impossible. In Mexico, the conditions for landowner romance had already been destroyed by the revolution of 1910, a world-historic peasant insurrection that ended the latifundio for good. In other places, landowner rule was challenged by the intensification of peasant and indigenous resistance, on the one hand, and economic decline on the other. In these contexts, landowner romance was forced to take one of two new paths. In the first, authors would give up any pretense to the progressive role of the landed class, doubling down on its reactionary role. In the Chilean novelist Joaquín Edwards Bello's *La chica del Crillón* (The girl at the Crillon hotel, 1935), for example, the action is resolved when an impoverished upper-class woman from Santiago marries a landowner from the South. This landowner, who arrives late in the novel's plot, is admired *not* because he is in any way progressive, but because he forcefully puts down indigenous Mapuche revolts on his estate. This position hardens even further in the Chilean novelist Eduardo Barrios's *Gran señor y rajadiablos* (Big lord and hell-raiser, 1948), which perhaps represents the dying gasp of landowner romance in its open celebration of a god-fearing, "feudal," and "ferociously virile" landowner.[44]

A second path, examined in the next chapter, was much more typical. For landowners would be compelled, increasingly, to adapt to the historical forces that could no longer be contained by romance. The response was sometimes a kind of realism in which landowners were obliged to countenance defeat by forces stronger than themselves. In more dramatic

moments, members of the landed class would entertain lurid fantasies of their own destruction, as the suppressed monsters of history came home to roost.

2

How Are Oligarchies Unmade? Landowner Realism

A plantation owner was a literary subject of the first order.
José Lins do Rego, *Bangüê*

Hard Truths

When faced with the stubborn reality of the latifundio, the crux of the agrarian question in Latin America, the 1920s regionalist novels studied in the previous chapter could not help but resolve their plots in favor of that very institution, as if a different social arrangement were unthinkable. As a measure of this intransigence, the landowner protagonists of these novels were protected from real-world problems such as the parasitic nature of rentier elites and the low productivity of isolated estates through the magical thinking of romance. This turn to romance marked the staying power of the latifundio, insofar as resolutions marked, even at the cost of the aesthetic unity of a text, a fiat-like imposition of the landowner's will. This apparent strength also signaled a weakness, however, since the landowner's prerogatives could be affirmed only by suspending reality in his favor. Romance, that is, did not so much resolve the crises facing the landed class as postpone their resolution.

Bills, however, have a way of coming due. And in a subsequent phase, the novel was no longer able to coddle the landowner with self-satisfying resolutions (as in *Don Segundo Sombra*) or contain the frightening rise of other classes with fairy tale–like endings (as in *Doña Bárbara*). Instead, novels that continued to center a landed perspective were forced to encounter reality from a much less protected position, giving way to what I provisionally identify as a mode of landowner realism. As an example, we can turn to a key moment in José Lins do Rego's *Bangüê*, in which the narrator, a young heir to a sugar plantation in Northeastern Brazil, is suddenly forced to face a "hard truth": namely, that his grandfather's plantation, beset by debts, crop failures, and problems with tenants, would soon be liquidated. There is nothing left for the protagonist to do but observe this decline, noting, coolly, that "there was something mysterious about this deterioration."[1] With this, Lins placed landowners on a collision course with a reality they could no longer bend to their will but instead were forced to face head on, no matter the consequences. At the same time, as Lins's narrator notes, there was something "mysterious" about the decline of twentieth-century Latin American landowners, which is another way of saying that that mysterious decline prodded the author to discover heretofore uncharted regions of social experience.

Focusing on Lins, together with the Mexican author Rosario Castellanos, this chapter examines how the novel posed and answered a different agrarian question: how landed oligarchies, dominant across Latin America—in some cases until well into the twentieth century—might finally meet their end, whether through economic modernization, revolution, and/or state-mandated land reform. I should note at the outset that the two authors chosen for this task, from two very different corners of Latin America, are not frequently approached from this vantage point, much less read together. Lins is most often approached as a backward-gazing, nostalgia-soaked Brazilian regionalist whose best-known works lamented the passage of traditional plantation society as it gave way to an urban and bourgeois one. Castellanos, in turn, had spent her youth on an estate in a remote part of Chiapas and is most frequently approached as either a feminist or pro-indigenous intellectual forged in the modernizing mold of the post-revolutionary Mexican state. While these are not unfair characterizations, they do not begin to capture the insights each of these authors provides into the historic processes of oligarchic decline. In the 1930s, Lins authored a

five-novel cycle dedicated to tracing the downfall of the sugar plantation complex in early twentieth-century Northeastern Brazil and its replacement by a mechanized factory system. Castellanos's novel *Balún Canán*, the first entry of her Chiapas trilogy, set its gaze on the decline of landed elites in the wake of the Mexican Revolution, amid state-mandated land, labor, and educational reforms in the 1930s. In formal terms, each author relied upon classically realist forms like the bildungsroman and historical novel as a means of evoking the inexorable historical forces that threatened to destroy oligarchies. Such genres, though, never constitute ideal types; instead, they provide starting points for understanding how aesthetic forms morph under historical pressure. Along these lines, the mode I am calling landowner realism always seems to diverge from realist practice, if nothing else then because its basic premise is the dissolution of the landed class, together with the perspective that sustains it. Landowner realism, insofar as it sets out to examine a process of economic, psychic, or even bodily destruction, thus inevitably tests the bounds of realism itself. In some moments, the popular threats previously kept at bay by romance become actual monsters ready to devour landowners, resulting in a gothic mode. In other moments, affects such as dread and paranoia threaten to dissolve consciousness itself. Landowner realism, in these cases, cedes ground to modes of expression that threaten to overturn reality altogether. From one angle, realism is undercut, but from another it is reborn as a window onto the deranged experiences of a class poised to disappear.

And yet, in tune with Latin American history, overturning oligarchic rule was never that simple. As a result, the question of how landed subjects might save themselves from annihilation or reach some compromise with implacable historical forces became a key gambit of the novels studied in this chapter. For in contrast with a novel like William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), a standard-bearer of a modernist aesthetic of landed decline in world letters, the Latin American novels considered in this chapter never completely dissolve their chosen perspective. Nor do they ever completely give way to supernatural visions of horror but instead work to retain a grip on reality. In this manner, the examples of landowner realism chosen for this chapter reveal not only how oligarchies are unmade, but how they might persist. To recall Gramsci's famous words about interregnums, the "morbid symptoms" evinced by these novels help us

theorize how aspects of an old regime refuse to die even when their expiration seems to have been secured.

Sugarcane Realism

On first glance, José Lins do Rego was a practitioner not of realism, but rather, in keeping with dominant interpretations, of a nostalgic variant of landowner romance. Lins spent much of his youth on a sugar plantation in the Zona da Mata in Northeastern Brazil, the setting for nearly all his novels, and is broadly considered an author of a lost-plantation arcadia in opposition to the anonymity of increasing urbanization and industrialization in twentieth-century Brazil. This nostalgia for plantation life was in turn linked more broadly to a Brazilian regionalist movement that converged around the sociologist Gilberto Freyre, a close friend and mentor to Lins. Often contrasted with Brazilian *modernismo*, a 1920s avant-garde movement centered in a dynamic and industrializing São Paulo, regionalism emerged from the depressed sugarcane region of the Northeast.[2] From the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, enslaved African labor produced the sugar exports that transformed the Northeast into the most opulent region of Brazil. But emancipation in 1888 (the last in the hemisphere), coupled with ecological depletion and technological stagnation, left the region in steep decline. Increasingly, Southern Brazil displaced the Northeast as the country's center of accumulation, first through coffee, then through industry. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Northeastern sugar plantations were increasingly displaced by highly mechanized sugar mills (*usinas*). As one historian notes, by 1920, some forty usinas had absorbed over four hundred *engenhos*, radically transforming the social landscape.[3] In a manner consistent with the Southern Agrarians in the US, Brazilian regionalists from the Northeast proffered a traditionalist and conservative response to the decline of plantation society by proclaiming the superiority of patriarchal values over bourgeois-mercantile ones. Gilberto Freyre's (in)famous *Casa-grande e senzala* (*The Masters and the Slaves*, 1933), for example, recalled the colonial-era plantation as an enlarged hierarchical family that had given way to atomized and anonymous life in cities. Though he recognized the brutality of slavery, Freyre considered that something important had been lost when its patriarchal unity broke apart and gave

way, to recall the title of a later work, to “mansions” and “shanties” (*Sobrados e Mocambos*, 1936).

Lins considered himself a disciple of Freyre, and his novels certainly bear a kinship with his thinking. This is especially true of Lins’s first and best-known novel, *Menino de engenho* (*Plantation Boy*, 1932), which reads like an elegy for the old-time plantation. Narrated in the first person by Carlos de Melo, the author’s fictional alter ego, the novel recounts the character’s youth in the Zona da Mata region in the early twentieth century. The story begins with an act of traumatic patriarchal violence in the city of Recife, when Carlos’s father murders his mother; the boy’s earliest memory is his mother “completely bathed in blood” (3). Following this horrific loss, Carlos is sent to live on his grandfather’s plantation, encoded as a more salutary patriarchal regime. There he spends days playing in the old slave quarters with the sons of sharecroppers, watching the movements of the old sugar mill, and overhearing the sexually frank banter of the servants. Presiding over this order is the boy’s grandfather, the gruff Zé Paulino, whose reign is viewed as being guided by “kindness and benevolence” (65) by the narrator: “There were more than four thousand people under his protection. He was a feudal lord, but servitude did not lie heavy on the backs of these peasants” (68–9).

Statements like these would be enough to dismiss Lins outright as an insufferable apologist for the white Brazilian landed class—which indeed he was—were it not for his parallel attempt to face the decline of this class as a realist. As other critics have argued, Lins’s attempts to understand the wider forces producing planter ruin should not be underestimated; Michael Niblett, for example, notes that for all his patriarchal nostalgia, the author was “relatively clear-eyed when it comes to the historical fate of the *engenhos* and the impossibility of a return to a now outmoded past.”[4] And indeed, even in his most nostalgia-infused novel, *Plantation Boy*, youthful remembrances are always accompanied by a realist impulse that exceeds nostalgia, or at the very least places it in a wider historical frame. As evidence, the boy’s grandfather, Zé Paulino, is simultaneously depicted as an old-time patriarch and—as befits a region long integrated into global capitalist markets—an ambitious agrarian entrepreneur who has gobbled up all the lands around him: “Not content with his mill on the Santa Rosa plantation, he had bought eight other mills with the profits from sugar and cotton. The happiest days of his life were when he signed a bill of sale, paid

the sales taxes, or took possession of the lands that now belonged to him" (68). The simultaneously traditional and modern character of the plantation is perhaps best metaphorized by the sugar mill itself, whose movement alternates between a "lazy" wheel and "rollers that turned so fast they did not seem to want to stop" (11). The slow temporality associated with a lost childhood arcadia, that is, already exists within a rapid movement that exceeds individual control. In like manner, amber-encased personal memory bears the imprint of implacable historical movement.

This tension between personal memory and impersonal historical movement characterizes not just *Plantation Boy* but, on a larger scale, the five-novel "sugarcane cycle" Lins dedicated to the Northeastern plantation zone. Published between 1932 and 1936, the five novels attempted to chart nothing less than a history of the passage from the plantation system represented in his first novel, *Plantation Boy*, to the factory (usina) system that serves as the title of the last novel.[5] The first person to note the sweeping character of the cycle was perhaps the avant-garde writer Mário de Andrade, who wrote to Lins in 1942: "Aside from the singular value of each one of your books, people one day will be astonished by the vast importance of your oeuvre as a whole. You are defining, more than any sociologist, a period of Brazilian life, the character of a society, and the critical significance of a mean and inexorable tragedy."[6] Andrade's opinion allows us to begin to reframe Lins's work in at least two ways. First, the antimony between Andrade's modernismo and Lins's regionalism might be less pronounced than we generally understand. Lins was invested not simply in nostalgic remembrance, but in "inexorable" historical processes. Inversely, Andrade's modernist vision carried within itself some sympathy for the "tragedy" of patriarchal decline.[7] Second, in a different register, Andrade values Lins's novels because, according to him, they provide better access to changing social dynamics than sociology, a discipline that, under Freyre at least, had taken flight into the realm of conciliatory romance. The novel thus offers a unique set of insights into history that cannot be found anywhere else.

In its sensitivity to historical movement, Lins's cycle might plausibly be placed within a longer tradition of the historical novel, a narrative form theorized by Lukács as charged with narrating the explosive historical movement released by bourgeois revolutions in nineteenth-century Europe. As Fredric Jameson notes, the leitmotif of the historical novel is the

“passage of the old order to a bourgeois society.”[8] Frequently, this transition was narrated by members of a vanquished noble or landed class: Honoré de Balzac and Sir Walter Scott were emblematic in this regard. Such conditions resonate with Lins, whose sugarcane cycle coincided with the abrupt overthrow of the oligarchic republic by the modernizing dictatorial regime of Getúlio Vargas in 1930. Forged in the wake of the Great Depression, the Vargas regime, known as the Estado Novo or New State, reoriented the Brazilian economy away from agricultural exports and toward industry. As a result of this transition, the vanquishing of an older landed regime became available to the Brazilian novel, perhaps for the first time. For although the plantation zone of Northeastern Brazil was itself born as an appendage of bourgeois society, it never experienced anything resembling a bourgeois revolution in the nineteenth century: Brazilian independence from Portugal in 1822 resulted in a monarchical government that lasted until 1889; emancipation in 1888 freed enslaved people but perpetuated other forms of coerced labor like sharecropping. In the 1930s, however, the social structures that had sustained landed oligarchies did begin to crumble, allowing Lins to understand himself as a member of a vanquished regime.

In an important sense, however, the historical transition Lins writes about was very different from those evoked in European novels a century earlier, which in turn resulted in a wholly sui generis kind of historical novel. For one, while the Northeastern planter class was in the throes of an irrevocable decline, it had not yet completely disappeared. Lins was, in this regard, far removed from a figure like Sir Walter Scott, whose historical distance from the dissolution of the Scottish clans allowed him to view this eventuality with what Lukács referred to as “epic calm.”[9] Moreover, whereas in Lukács’s analysis the nineteenth-century historical novel was animated by the popular energies released by bourgeois revolution, as history became “the property of the broadest masses” for the first time, no similar energies propel Lins’s sugarcane cycle.[10] Instead, perhaps as an expression of the relative recentness of landed decline, it remains wedded to a rather myopic class perspective. In this, Lins also remains quite distant from the model of realism pioneered by Latin American contemporaries like Jorge Amado, a committed Communist whose novels from the 1930s and 1940s evoked the transformation in the Northeast cacao region from the perspective of the region’s oppressed majorities. In the next chapter, I trace how the discovery

of a popular perspective gave birth to a new kind of historical novel in Latin America. Here, though, I want to dwell on the (dying) landed perspective embedded in Lins's fiction as producing both ideological distortions and unexpected founts of insight into history. For, and perhaps against the author's own conscious intentions, Lins's novels stage a process through which a landed perspective—imprisoned by fantasies of natural superiority in a situation that no longer sustains them—quite literally comes undone.

This dissolution of perspective becomes most apparent in the lopsided organization of the five-novel sugarcane cycle as a whole. The first three novels, *Plantation Boy, Doidinho*, and *Bangüê*, are all narrated in the first person by Carlos de Melo. Taken together, these three novels constitute a bildungsroman dedicated to different stages in Carlos's personal development: his early childhood on the Santa Rosa plantation; adolescence at school in Recife; and, finally, return to the plantation as a young heir. After losing the estate in that third novel, however, Carlos de Melo's first-person perspective disappears from the cycle. The subsequent novel of the cycle, *O moleque Ricardo*, omnisciently narrates the fate of a former sharecropper—Carlos's childhood playmate—who migrates to Recife in search of work, only to become imprisoned there. Carlos appears in a minor role, as a university student, but he is no longer the protagonist or narrator. The final novel of the cycle, *Usina*, in turn traces, again by an omniscient narrator, the rise and fall of Carlos's Uncle Juca, whose own cane factory is engulfed by an even larger one.

With this structure, it becomes apparent that Lins could not avoid employing a first-person oligarchic perspective to animate his works, at the same time as the very history his novels narrate won't allow that perspective to continue. The dissolution of this perspective reaches its maximum expression in the third novel of the cycle, *Bangüê*, to which I now turn as an alternately distorted and insightful window onto landowner decline. This novel, whose title refers to an old-style sugar plantation, begins with Carlos's return to his grandfather's plantation by train after receiving a university education in the city of Recife. The young heir's homecoming is a frequent trope in Latin American regionalist fiction: We might recall, for example, the beginning of Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara* considered in chapter 1, in which Santos Luzardo returns to his family's remote estate after many years spent in Caracas. Like his citified Venezuelan counterpart, Carlos is a young idealist who immediately finds

himself at odds with his rural environment. The key difference, however, is that in *Bangüê*, Lins does not call on romance to prop up the landowner's dominance and self-regard; instead, Carlos's encounter with reality will produce an incontrovertible defeat. As a corollary, what was coded in *Doña Bárbara* as the protagonist's earnest idealism is openly derided as a delusion in *Bangüê*, one that will precipitate the protagonist's downfall. From the outset, Carlos steps forth as a character who suffers from a profound perceptual gap between fantasy and reality. While studying in Recife, he had developed visions of an opulent, seigneurial, and genteel life on the plantation, mostly from the books he read. When he returns home for visits, however, this literary vision is contradicted by the rather shameful and diminished reality of the plantation, with its rough-hewn furniture, undernourished sharecroppers, and constantly drunk relatives, "whose sons ran around barefoot" (325). Poised between a literary fantasy and an impoverished present, Carlos dreams of restoring the plantation to its past grandeur: "My dreams carried me to the greatest heights as I thought of taking over the humble Santa Rosa plantation and transforming it into the luxurious place it had been in the old days. I would give big parties, fill the great house with comfort; I would make a new world out of my plantation" (298). The distance between Carlos's fantasy and reality is marked by the persistent use of the conditional tense throughout the novel. Indeed, *would* is the verb that appears most consistently to underscore the actions that Carlos plans to undertake but will never be able to realize.

This failure results, on one level, from Carlos's education in Recife, which leaves him ill-prepared for plantation life: In one scene, his grandfather and uncle talk of the cotton crop, "all sorts of things in which I had absolutely no interest" (300). There is certainly some irony employed here, as Lins wishes to call our attention to Carlos's fecklessness and laziness. But on a deeper level, even if Carlos had replicated his grandfather's energetic habits rather than lying in a hammock creating "castles in the air" (419), the novel—and more broadly, the larger cycle to which *Bangüê* belongs—calls our attention to a deeper logic that prevents him from acting. Carlos, as the product of a new era, can neither replicate his grandfather's patriarchal rule nor emerge as an agrarian capitalist. Instead, these two outcomes form two opposite (and impossible) poles between which the heir will oscillate for the entire novel.

This oscillation can in turn be grasped on the level of a landed perspective that no longer knows where it stands in a new moment of history. Throughout the narrative, Carlos swings between internally contradictory fantasies of himself. At times he will dream of a feudal grandeur that never existed, in what might be read as a parody, intentional or not, of Freyrean dreams of patriarchal restoration. At other moments, though, he will dream of becoming an enlightened landowner on a model plantation: “Everyone would be happy, and the children would smell of soap imported from Europe” (420). Upon inheriting the plantation after his grandfather’s death, he will resolve to become a stern and hard-working patriarch like his grandfather, working from dawn to dusk with his *cabras*. But after a few days, he invariably returns to his hammock, where his aimless swinging provides a metaphor for his indecision. This inconsistency extends to Carlos’s approach to daily plantation life, particularly relations between masters and servants. On the one hand, Carlos is a male heir who feels at one with the plantation and its ordered hierarchy, in which the master assumes what he takes to be a God-given dominance over land, people, animals. On the other hand, however, Carlos is ill at ease with this social landscape, especially in relation to the violence and immiseration plantation owners bestow upon the formerly enslaved. At a relative’s plantation, for example, he announces discomfort at the horrendous conditions of the sharecroppers, half-starved and sallow; immediately after, however, he laments having to leave: “It was such a pleasant way to live. The land was good and the people were wonderful. There was no scarcity of servant girls” (415). The oscillation works in the other direction, too: In another moment, he exercises his patriarchal right to evict sharecroppers for “stealing” firewood from the brush but then feels guilty and rescinds the order. At several points, he fantasizes about moving to Recife and leaving the whole nasty business behind. But he can no more embrace patriarchal structures than he can abandon them, leading to an impasse Carlos cannot resolve on his own.

Carlos’s wildly oscillatory comportments call to mind Roberto Schwarz’s analysis of the fundamentally inconsistent character of nineteenth-century Brazilian elites in the novels of Machado de Assis. In Schwarz’s analysis, Brazilian national culture was itself fundamentally off-balance, insofar as appeals to “civilization” were immediately negated by the barbaric reality of slavery. In this historical situation, there was no possible way an elite

subject could be consistent, because the very system in which he operated placed him in an internally contradictory position. As Schwarz shows, the fin-de-siècle literary master Machado de Assis, a mixed-race writer ideologically opposed to slavery, made a literary breakthrough when he adopted, with biting irony, the inconsistency of the Brazilian oligarch as a formal principle of narration. The eponymous first-person narrators in *Memórias pósthumas de Brás Cubas* (*The Posthumous Memories of Brás Cubas*, 1881) and *Dom Casmurro* (1899), for example, were not just unreliable; they behaved according to principles of "caprice" and "volubility" wielded by patriarchs with limitless power over enslaved people and dependents alike.[11] In line with Schwarz, the critic José Antonio Pasta suggests that the social contradictions that gave rise to principles of volubility and caprice go far beyond Machado's fiction, to permit "the immediate generalization of the capitalist-slaveowner *senhor*" as a device operating within *all* Brazilian literature.[12] Such a generalization, however, leaves open the question of how to periodize this formal principle. For if at one moment the slaveowner/patriarch's contradictions were the up-to-date forms of barbarism that fueled so-called civilization, in another they really did become outmoded, exposing a rift between an old self-image and a new reality that did not favor him.

Bangüê reveals a historical moment in which inconsistency can no longer be wielded lightheartedly, for it no longer highlights the capacity of the oligarchic subject to act as he pleases. Instead, he comes under the sway of an impersonal reality he cannot control. As a mark of this crisis, Carlos's first-person viewpoint continues to be the undisputed center of consciousness, which under changing circumstances reveals itself as a dangerous source of blindness for which the narrator will pay dearly. For a brief moment after inheriting his estate, Carlos seems to stabilize, because he adopts the mantle of the *senhor* with power over all beings: "That entire world of land was mine without any loss. I had plenty of cattle to work the fields, more than a hundred oxen, a large herd of donkeys, a fine crop to be harvested, and good people over which to govern. I was a plantation owner" (430). We might recall a similar moment from *Don Segundo Sombra*, when the protagonist seamlessly inhabits the social authority of the father who has recognized him as an heir. But in Lins's more realist text, this transfer of power is a total illusion. For instead of closing with a happy continuation, the inheritance abruptly gives way to Carlos's announcement

that three years have passed, to find him on the verge of losing the estate. He has sold cotton at the wrong price, collected small sugar harvests, and is unable to replace broken equipment on the plantation. With this jarring temporal leap, a plot based on false starts morphs into one in which events cascade to spell his defeat. In this sped-up plot, two forces irrupt to ruin Carlos and force him from the Santa Rosa plantation for good: a prosperous tenant, Zé Marreira, and, not far behind him, a centralized sugar mill.

We can safely assume that the social forces personified by the tenant and the sugar mill have been present from the first page of the novel, though Carlos has been unable to perceive them. Zé Marreira, Carlos reveals belatedly, had been an oxcart driver for his grandfather who made money transporting cane alcohol to the interior; this in turn allowed Zé to become a prosperous tenant farmer on the estate. Yet Carlos is unable to register the tenant's existence until he learns that several sharecroppers have left Santa Rosa to work for him. Driving home the belatedness of this observation, Carlos notes that Zé "had become powerful" (435); this occurred, we must assume, while Carlos himself was lolling in his hammock, dreaming of improving his estate. True to his old ways, Carlos is indignant that the tenant, whom he constantly refers to as *moleque* (a term for "boy" that carries the same connotations as in the US South) or *cabra* (a term for a mixed-race person that literally means "goat"), "was beginning to behave like a landowner" (446). Tellingly, in a novel so attuned to verb tenses as a window onto action, Carlos is irked by the authority embedded in Zé's speech: "Every day it was 'I did,' or else 'I ordered'—always the authoritative past tense" (446). Notably, this authoritative past tense is unavailable to Carlos, whose plans, as noted, never materialize from their postulation in the conditional.

Here another contrast with the mode of landowner romance studied in the previous chapter is illustrative. Rómulo Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara* also presented a threat of an upstart—in that case, a mestiza woman whom the landowner was able to dominate with hoary patriarchal power. But nothing of the sort occurs in *Bangüê*: Instead, in a more realist fashion, Carlos's attempt to behave as a patriarch under circumstances that no longer sustain these habits actively accelerates his ruin. Carlos's immediate reaction to Zé is one of patriarchal wounded pride, and he summarily evicts the tenant. The latter humbly requests compensation for the improvements he has made to the land, including twenty painted houses for his cane workers (the

same houses Carlos dreamed of building, but never did). Carlos balks at the notion of a tenant investing in the land as if it were his and refuses to buy the installations, leading Marreira to sell them to the nearby São Felix sugar factory instead. Much to Carlos's amazement, the law is on the tenant's side, and in order to get the factory off his land, he is forced to buy the houses back from the sugar factory on credit. A misguided fit of patriarchal rage against an upstart thus effectively places Carlos in debt to the sugar company, sealing his ruin. Marreira, by contrast, catapults in standing by using his profit to buy a ruined sugar plantation, transforming himself into a landowner.[13]

This reversal is only possible as the result of the silent incursion of a higher economic force in the text, invisible to Carlos until it is too late: the factory system. Fittingly, the São Felix factory enters the novel in an indirect manner, by means of the stationery Marreira uses to inform Carlos of the sale. With this letter, Carlos suddenly awakens to a reality that has been invisible to him (and, by extension, the reader) since the opening of the novel:

> The São Felix factory in the middle of my plantation! … The factory had thousands of workers in its fields; railroad cars loaded with sugar cane ran over the tracks day and night, with armed watchmen … The factory had ten times more land than Santa Rosa and produced six hundred sacks each day. It did in two days what my plantation could do in a year. (474)

On the one hand, the belated arrival of the factory in the plot may well be interpreted as an aesthetic flaw. In a realist text, we might legitimately expect some insight into how the factory system impinged upon the plantation system from the earliest section of the novel. But Carlos doesn't ever report who owns the factory, or whose interests it serves; how this system took root and who presides over it remain a total mystery. This absence is especially important given the fact that the usina system was formed by a faction of the same landed class to which Carlos belongs; he confronts this faction as if it were an alien force. On the other hand, there is something insightful, however unintentionally so, in the narrator's belated recognition that the force ruining him is an abstract and impersonal one. This recognition is amplified when world sugar prices decline, making it impossible for Carlos to get out of debt to the usina. With this, his remaining shreds of patriarchal power fray even further: Sharecroppers, sensing his weakness, glare at him and begin to refuse to pay rent; someone

even burns a field, causing him to lose his crop. The law, on the side of the usina, refuses to intervene, leaving Carlos on his own to defend his interests.

The landowner is thus forced to face the "hard truth" of his decline: A superior economic force will swallow him. Ironically, the usina system did not produce efficiently enough to compete on the world market, meaning that Northeastern sugar was destined to serve national rather than international markets.[14] Even so, it was a great deal more productive than the old mill on Carlos's plantation, and so he faces total ruin. All of this seems simple enough; what is interesting on a textual level is how impending ruin begins to distort Carlos's perception of reality: The worse his situation, the more erratic and paranoid he becomes. The business with Zé robs him of sleep at night; when forced to pass the tenant's plantation, he gallops past it, afraid he will receive a bullet in his back. Every waking moment is filled with dread. And with this, the landowner's grip on reality begins to loosen. This unraveling reaches its height when Carlos's trusted rent collector, Nicolau (whom he refers to as a "good Negro") is killed by tenant farmers on the furthermost edges of the plantation. Feeling unprotected, Carlos makes another servant sleep on the floor on a mat beside him, but the insomnia and nightmares don't go away. He begins to see Nicolau's face everywhere, as if haunting him. Amid the mounting squalor of the plantation, he is invaded by supernatural-laced fears. He orders the door to the plantation sanctuary locked because the vision of Saint Severino in a coffin "would drive me to a night of desperation" (522). Even more notably, the popular legends the boy learned on the plantation as a child begin to disturb his reality: "I remembered a story the Negro women had told in my childhood about a being that they said appeared every night on the walls of the storeroom, making grimaces. Standing there alone, with only a little sunlight left outside, I became afraid. It was the fear I felt when Nicolau looked in at me at night" (521). Such popular legends, we can recall, already appeared in *Doña Bárbara*, as in the indigenous curse wrought upon the landed clan for killing the region's original inhabitants to create an estate. But Gallegos's novel, while conjuring this legend, ultimately contained its subversive energies with a fairy tale of patriarchal right. In *Bangüê*, the tables begin to turn, as members of the landed class—no longer confident in their ability to impose their will—begin to imagine themselves threatened by popular "monsters." With this, a mode of

landowner realism begins to take on the contours of something not quite realist.

Although this nonrealist register remains wholly incipient in *Bangüê*, it presents a germ, a speculation regarding the possible paths a landed perspective might take under conditions of irrevocable decline. We might imagine, on the one hand, a further disintegration of consciousness to produce something more akin to the modernist style of William Faulkner in novels such as *Absalom, Absalom!* or the Brazilian author Lúcio Cardoso's *Crónica da casa assasinada* (*Chronicle of the Murdered House*, 1959), which focuses on the decay of a landed family in Minas Gerais. Alternately, if a fear of supernatural beings were to intensify, we might imagine the emergence of a full-blown gothic mode like the one that appears in Rosario Castellanos's *Balún Canán*, examined below, in which members of the landed class fear that their eldest son is being "eaten" by indigenous sorcerers.

Something very different happens in *Bangüê*, however, because the landowner, after experiencing some initial symptoms, restabilizes himself by liquidating his estate. Once his fate is sealed, Carlos accepts an offer from his uncle Juca, himself a budding agrarian capitalist, to buy the Santa Rosa plantation. The disintegration of consciousness, in this manner, is stopped when the landowner accepts that he must become something else. The novel's last scene shows Carlos on the train back to Recife as he bids a final farewell to his childhood home, his dignity intact, and no poorer in the bargain:

> The Santa Rosa plantation had come to an end. It was truly a luxurious funeral with a coffin costing three hundred thousand *mil-reis*. Tomorrow a factory chimney would dominate the *cajázeira* trees. The *pau-d'arco* trees would no longer bloom; the land would learn what it was to work for a factory; and the *moleques* would come to know what it meant to go hungry. I was leaving with my pockets full, but they would have to stay. (527)

Carlos's favored conditional tense again predominates, but its effect is different in the cold light of the sale: It is now indeed quite likely that a factory chimney will dominate the plantation. In a fit of patriarchal nostalgia, Carlos laments the replacement of the old plantation with an anonymous and uncaring capitalist system (as if his own family had not enslaved and exploited people in search of profits). While this disposition is certainly traditionalist, there is something entirely new in it as well: The

former landowner, “leaving with [his] pockets full,” is able to assert a distance from former dependents to whom he now owes nothing. The narrator seems to recognize this gesture by admitting that his nostalgic waxing is something of a ruse; in the end, he was only “pretending to feel sorry for the fate of my *cabras*” (527). With the self-saving (and self-serving) transformation of the patriarch into a bourgeois, former dependents remain “his” in some way, but he no longer has to bother with any obligations to them. For Carlos, this represents a death, insofar as “everything lay behind me”; on the flip side, though, it is a new beginning for a man who has “bought his passage into the world,” ready to begin anew. His former dependents, meanwhile, become vulnerable to eviction by the emergent factory system.

The possibility of such a resolution is meaningful: Historical conditions, it seems, allow for the transformation of a ruined landowner into a bourgeois, who instead of going mad or continuing to agonize in squalor, makes a neat fortune he can carry to the city. On a formal level, Carlos de Melo’s first-person perspective is liquidated, even as its oligarchic condescension carries over into later novels of Lins’s sugarcane cycle. As previously mentioned, the first three novels of the cycle ground themselves in Carlos’s first-person perspective. *Bangüê*, however, dramatizes the literal and figurative disintegration of this perspective, paving the way to the emergence of an omniscient perspective to narrate the final two novels of the cycle, *O Moleque Ricardo* and *Usina*. This turn to omniscience simultaneously marks the end of the first-person landed perspective within the novelistic cycle and its reaccommodation in a new, post-plantation era. *O Moleque Ricardo*, for example, reverts to a period occurring before the action of *Bangüê* to track the movements of Carlos de Melo’s childhood friend, the son of sharecroppers, in a search for employment in Recife. Omniscient narration provides access to settings that would not have been available to the self-consciously blinkered perspective of Carlos de Melo, such as the bakery where Ricardo is exposed to radical ideas. As a result, a new principle of distance and detachment is introduced into the narrative apparatus. We are no longer held captive by a narrator who places his own consciousness at the center of the world. Instead, Lins is forced, as the result of the historical process traced in *Bangüê*, to adopt a wider view.

In a real sense, the transition from a first-person to an omniscient narrator in Lins’s sugarcane cycle formalizes a wider transition, from a system of

patriarchal domination to a bourgeois society in which domination, mediated by cash, becomes a more abstract and impersonal affair. At the same time, however, the older landed perspective does not completely disappear. Instead, as Paula Maciel Barbosa notes, the first pages of *O Moleque Ricardo* read "as if Carlos de Melo had continued as narrator."[15] Carlos's nostalgia-glazed farewell to Santa Rosa is repeated, in turn, at the end of *Usina*, when the omniscient narrator recalls the benevolent face of the patriarch José Paulino in the moment the plantation is acquired by a large factory.[16] As the ending to the cycle's final novel makes clear, there is no going back to the previous order—it is gone. Even so, Lins's ability to reaccommodate a vanquished perspective within a more distant form of omniscience perhaps attests to the relative tranquility of the transition he evokes in his novels. The oligarchic republic might have ended in the 1930s, but it was supplanted by a form of capitalism that allowed its patriarchal dispositions and racial fantasies to carry over into a new era. In this manner, Lins's cycle evokes significant historical change while paradoxically preserving a class outlook undisturbed by the prospect of revolution or even mild reform in the countryside. Absent the threat of widescale redistribution—much less retribution—the landed class might come to accept the "hard truth" of decline, its edges blurred by a bittersweet nostalgia.[17]

Southern Mexican Gothic

Lins's *Bangüê* marked, incipiently, two possible paths for the landed perspective embroiled in a terminal crisis: This perspective might stand its ground but be engulfed by the symptoms of decline, such as insomnia, dread, and supernatural visions. Alternatively, it could avoid this fate by relinquishing its status as patriarch but gaining a new foothold as a bourgeois. This first possibility is glimpsed in *Bangüê* but quickly pushed aside in favor of the second. By contrast, another kind of novel might linger on those symptoms, and the strange reality to which they give rise. This was the case, certainly, of Lins's later novel *Fogo morto* (Dead fires, 1943), in which the author allows the symptoms of planter decline to flourish to a much greater degree than in his previous sugarcane cycle. Faced with ruin

after emancipation, the landowner Seu Lula—who had appeared in Lins's earlier novels as a prototype of an archaic kind of landowner—doesn't leave the area; instead, he wanders, disheveled and unshaven, around his dilapidated plantation, irately demanding, "Who's in charge here, huh?" to a squatter who openly disobeys his commands.[18] But such symptoms become even more pronounced in the Mexican novelist Rosario Castellanos's *Balún Canán*, the novel to which I now turn, in which members of a landed class begin to fear bodily destruction at the hands of restive servants.

Semi-autobiographical in character, *Balún Canán* focuses on the travails of a landed clan in Chiapas as it confronts the belated arrival of the Mexican Revolution to the region. Lasting between 1910 and 1920, the Mexican Revolution was a cataclysmic and world-altering conflict sparked by widespread landlessness and forced servitude among the country's indigenous peasant majority. In the wake of the revolution, the Mexican state pursued far-reaching land, labor, and educational reforms that put an end to the hacienda system for the first time in Latin American history. For the most part, this revolution also ended the dominant landed perspective embedded in the novel. This was not the case of Castellanos, however, whose own history in Chiapas pointed to a much longer history of oligarchic decline and resurgence. And indeed, her novel *Balún Canán*, partially based on remembrances of her childhood in Chiapas, powerfully explores landed *fears* of destruction amid the persistence of that very class.

As an initial example of how this dialectic of fear and persistence expresses itself, we can turn to an early scene from the first part of the novel. The narrator of this first part, an unnamed seven-year-old girl, spies on her mother as she receives a visit from a traveling saleswoman in their home in the provincial city of Comitán. After examining beautiful filigreed earrings and embroidered shawls smuggled across the border from Guatemala, the mother declines to buy anything. In a flash, the pleasant atmosphere evaporates as the saleswoman offers to sell her a map showing a secret border crossing instead, "Because the time will come when you have to run away."[19] With this, the chapter ends, the threat hanging in the air. Most of the chapters of the first part of the novel proceed with the same one-two punch, in which the familiar and quotidian invariably become menacing. I will have more to say about such episodes below; for the moment, however, I want to underscore how the threat of landowner dispossession—and, if escape cannot be secured, possibly death—hangs

like a nightmare on every page, becoming apprehensible on the level of opaque and threatening utterances.

We don't have to get too far into the novel to understand that what the landed class feared was the revolution itself and, as an even more terrifying possibility, the rebellion of the indigenous servants it had brutally dominated for more than a century. The roots of this fear lay in the deeply colonial arrangement of Chiapas society, where a tiny minority of nonindigenous or *ladino* landowners retained a firm grip on the Maya population they had dispossessed and forced into servitude a century earlier. Since the mid-nineteenth-century liberal *Reforma* and culminating during the Porfirio Díaz regime, this class had successfully appropriated Church and indigenous lands, transforming them into cattle ranches and sugar plantations in the highlands, and coffee plantations in the lowlands. But access to land meant nothing without access to labor, and the entire system relied upon arrangements such as *baldiaje*, by which dispossessed Maya communities were forced to work for the landowner three or four days of the week in exchange for access to a small plot of land.[20] Reactionary to its core, this landed class—known euphemistically as *la familia chiapaneca*—had successfully resisted most of the reforms instituted by the Mexican state after the revolution. The official end of debt peonage in 1914, for example, was met by landowners (among them Ernesto Castellanos, the writer's father) with campaigns of paramilitary violence against indigenous labor organizers, in an effort to restore the pre-revolutionary Porfirian regime as much as possible.[21] Along these lines, Joshua Lund notes that Chiapas was "something like the 'deep South' of Mexico, with all the discursive weight implied by such a term intact."[22] Others have stressed that Chiapas's social structure resembled less those of other regions of Mexico than that of Guatemala, the colonial captaincy it had belonged to prior to nineteenth-century independence.[23] But for all its "Southern" or "Central American" characteristics, Chiapas *was* part of Mexico; and, in the 1930s, the progressive government of Lázaro Cárdenas, responsible for nationalizing Mexican oil and vastly expanding land reform programs, vowed to bring the revolution to Chiapas.

The reverberations of this threat continue into the parlor scene depicted in *Balún Canán*, in which it is assumed that things might get so bad that ladinos will have to leave the region. On a biographical level, the threat rang true: Rosario Castellanos's immediate family left Chiapas during the

Cárdenas period and relocated to Mexico City. As an adult, the author would herself become a champion of the aims of the post-revolutionary Mexican state; in 1956, for example, she returned to Chiapas to work with the Instituto Nacional Indigenista, an agency designed to integrate indigenous peoples into national life under the banner of modernization.[24] It was with this return that Castellanos began to conceive and write her well-known Chiapas trilogy, which, in addition to *Balún Canán*, is composed of the short story collection *Ciudad Real* (*City of Kings*, 1960) and the historical novel *Oficio de tinieblas* (*The Book of Lamentations*, 1962). She would become even better known as a feminist writer, poet, and public intellectual. On all these counts—champion of the Mexican state, writer, and feminist—Castellanos was a traitor to the landed class into which she had been born. In keeping with this position, *Balún Canán* is totally devoid of the nostalgia that creeps into José Lins do Rego's childhood remembrances. Instead, the novel trains a cold eye on the crisis of oligarchic rule in Chiapas, and with it, selfhood, in a moment of deep crisis.

At the heart of this crisis was a fear of revolution but also, on a deeper level, of revenge by the indigenous servants the oligarchy had brutally dispossessed. This fear can be captured on the level of individual utterances, as in the case of the traveling saleswoman. It is also encoded in the very title of the novel, *Balún Canán*, the Maya-Tzeltal name for the city of Comitán where the girl and her family reside. With this title, an indigenous name overwrites a Spanish colonial one; this reinscription becomes especially meaningful in light of the landed class's understanding of itself as separate and superior beings vis-à-vis the indigenous people they had forced into servitude. Along these lines, the term ladino, widely used in Chiapas and in Guatemala, essentially means "not-Indian."[25] But the novel's title, together with epigraphs hailing from Maya texts like the *Popul Vuh*, stage the irruption of indigenous agencies into the ladino world, a proposition that struck cold terror into the hearts of landowners and their hangers-on. It matters little in this regard that the 1930s land reform did not, for the most part, succeed in dismantling the Chiapanecan oligarchy: The extreme reaction of this class helped it weather the Cárdenas period and maintain its large estates until late in the twentieth century.[26] But as Castellanos's novel reveals, even the mildest prospect of reform sparked fears that landowners would become victims of the "Indians" they had dispossessed.

But the novel's insights into oligarchic terror are most fully expressed when we consider the novel as a whole, especially its famously disjointed three-part organization. In a structure critics have long puzzled over, parts 1 and 3 of the novel are narrated by the unnamed seven-year-old girl as she goes about daily life in Comitán, often in the company of her also-unnamed Maya-Tzeltal nanny. The longer second part of the novel, however, enacts an abrupt shift in setting and perspective, as the girl's first-person narration in Comitán gives way to an omniscient narrator situated in her family's remote highland estate, Chactajal. In this second part, the longest of the novel, the narrative focus expands considerably. The girl, now one character among many, recedes into the background, allowing a much wider social canvas to come into focus. While parts 1 and 3 unfold as a series of loosely related impressionistic vignettes, the novel's middle section is characterized by a forward-moving plot that focuses on the open struggle between a landowner, César Argüello (the father of the child narrator of parts 1 and 3), and the indigenous peons on his estate. In basic terms, this plot is as follows: The peons, led by a man named Felipe, demand that the landowner comply with state mandates to provide a school for their children on the estate (a clear reference to one of the key areas of reform under the Cárdenas government). César meets this demand cynically and superficially by installing Ernesto, his illegitimate nephew, as a teacher. Ernesto, who can't speak Maya-Tzeltal, beats the children in a drunken stupor instead of teaching them. This, combined with César's refusal to pay the peons for their labor in the sugarcane harvest, sparks an outright rebellion in the climax of part 2, in which the peons burn down the estate's hated sugar mill. After Ernesto is shot and killed by an unnamed assailant, the Argüellos return to their house in the city of Comitán, ruined by the loss of the cane harvest and mounting debt to merchants in the city. With this, the third part of the novel returns to the seven-year-old girl's first-person perspective to narrate two traumatic events in the aftermath of the rebellion: first, her separation from her nanny, who is cast out of the home after revealing that sorcerers at the estate have cursed the family's only son and heir, Mario; and, second, Mario's actual death under mysterious circumstances.

Upon the novel's publication, this disjunctive structure was interpreted frequently as an aesthetic flaw, one that even earned the apologies of the author herself, who excused herself by noting that she "could not have structured the novel any other way."[27] But when viewed as an expression of

the historical crisis of oligarchic perspective, the novel's organization is a stroke of genius. For this structure stages a situation in which the story of individual oligarchic development cannot proceed as expected; for better or for worse (depending on one's political sympathies), it is literally bisected by a historic struggle the landed class can no longer contain. We can recall, along these lines, that the novels studied in the first chapter of this book were organized in such a way as to avoid an encounter between a landed subject and history, securing the harmony and longevity of the large estate through the magical thinking of romance, as in a novel like Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara*. When the landowner's encounter with history became unavoidable in Lins, the traumatic liquidation of the oligarchic subject was overcome, to a certain degree, by a combination of hard cash in conjunction with soft nostalgia for a time gone by. In *Balún Canán*, however, the first-person narration of selfhood is bisected by an omnisciently narrated story of the destruction of her family's estate by indigenous servants; or, to use the novel's own metaphor of fire, the story of individual development is set ablaze.

Viewed through the lens of genre, *Balún Canán* takes the perhaps unprecedented form of a first-person bildungsroman spliced by a historical novel. While each of these genres involves a pronounced dialectic between individual and society, and more often than not bleed into one another, we might say as shorthand that the bildungsroman is more resolutely focused on the development of a single individual, while the historical novel is generally more concerned with a larger historical tableau, as the destinies of individual characters play out against a background of constant upheaval. With these initial observations in mind, we can identify the bildungsroman and the historical novel as two formal building blocks in *Balún Canán*. These two forms are already implicit in the two most frequent approaches of the novel as either a feminist bildungsroman or neo-indigenist novel; what I am interested in here are the specific effects produced by their collision, which necessarily produces something totally new in the process.

In twentieth-century Latin America, the bildungsroman is often the story of *landed* youth, as we have seen in authors like Güiraldes and Lins. *Balún Canán*, by contrast, sets the genre on fire, so to speak, by way of a historical novel focused on indigenous rebellion. The bisection of a story of oligarchic self-formation by a self-contained historical novel can only be explained, I would argue, through recourse to the insurgent social energies

liberated, however belatedly and incompletely, in Chiapas by the Mexican Revolution. As already noted, Castellanos was a champion of the post-revolutionary state. But a more compelling relation to the revolution can be teased out through the novel's deployment of the literary forms generated by this event. As I discuss more fully in the next chapter, the irruption of the Mexican Revolution (and a few years later, the Russian Revolution) allowed, for the first time in Latin American history, the flourishing of novelistic perspectives "from below" to supplant what had been a dominant landed perspective. Key in this regard was the emergence of the subgenre known as the "novel of the Mexican Revolution," whose paradigmatic example, Mariano Azuela's 1915 classic *Los de abajo*, focuses on a ragtag band of insurgents fighting in the ranks of Pancho Villa's peasant army. And in Mexico as well as in the Andes, the 1930s *indigenista* novel, inspired by currents of socialist realism, focused on the historic dispossession and oppression of indigenous people at the hands of landowners and imperialists. As a Mexican example, Gregorio López y Fuentes's *Tierra* (1932) depicted the transformation of peons on an estate in Morelos into revolutionary Zapatista soldiers. In planting an omnisciently narrated indigenous rebellion at the center of her novel, Castellanos is undoubtedly calling on these forms; indeed, more than any direct mention of land reform or the Lázaro Cardenas government, the transformative force unleashed by the Mexican Revolution becomes apprehensible in *Balún Canán* through the collision of genres.

The fact that *Balún Canán* assumes the structure of a first-person bildungsroman literally bisected by an omnisciently narrated novel of indigenous rebellion is revelatory insofar as it stages, on the level of formal organization, an unfinished historical struggle between landed and indigenous sectors of society. On a deeper level, it stages a battle of perspectives: on the one hand, the first-person perspective of a girl from a landed family, and, on the other, the omniscient perspective that narrates a collective story of revolt. Neither of these perspectives, however, can be isolated from the other: Instead, in keeping with the metaphor of fire, they transform each other, as if on a chemical level, from within. Along these lines, it is perhaps the irruption of history into the bildungsroman that allows a girl to become the protagonist of the bildungsroman in the first place. Normally relegated to the margins of patriarchal society, the crisis of that system creates a vacuum in which she can tell her own story. Historical

instability, that is, is what allows the girl to acquire a voice and tell her own story. As a result of this very opening, however, the girl's story of development cannot proceed normally, because her whole class is threatened with disappearance. As a result, as I explore below, the girl's story becomes flooded with symptoms of oligarchic terror, calling into question how she might achieve maturity at all. Conversely, the historical novel, for all its liberatory, popular narrative energies, cannot stand on its own. Instead, it is literally attached to a narrative of individual oligarchic selfhood, a formal arrangement that necessarily clouds its historical vision. In what follows, I consider each of these mutations under the rubrics of the gothic bildungsroman and contained historical novel, respectively, to ask what they might tell us about the unmaking—and persistence—of a landed oligarchy in crisis.

Gothic Bildungsroman: A Cursed Selfhood

Parts 1 and 3 of the novel, narrated by the seven-year-old daughter of the Argüello clan, provide our initial entry point into the fictional world of *Balún Canán*. As noted briefly above, the episodes she recounts revolve around daily life in Comitán, such as the episode in which she spies on her mother with the traveling saleswoman. Without fail, however, these episodes evoke a kind of idyll only to immediately reveal its dark underside. In another instance, the girl plays with schoolmates, as their teacher looks on, her face framed by flitting bamboo leaves. Following a visit from a mysterious lady, however, the teacher's benevolence evaporates in a flash of paranoia, as she warns the girls that unnamed actors are trying to take away their school, "the pride of the town" and the girls must respond by maintaining composure and, "above all, secrecy" (18). Other chapters unfold in the same manner: The girl accompanies her mother on a visit to a spinster; some boredom ensues, until the woman entreats the girl's mother, Zoraida, to look at the handkerchief she is embroidering for her mother, "to cover her face when she dies" (36).

Taken together, such scenes constitute a distinct style in which day-to-day life becomes overtaken by fear and dread. This style, I venture, constitutes a sui generis kind of Southern gothic, which, like its twentieth-century US counterpart, emits the shrill symptoms of a landed class in the

throes of decline. As noted in the previous section, this stylistic possibility briefly announced itself in Lins's novel *Bangüê* before being quashed; *Balún Canán*, however, allows it to flourish, this time from the perspective of a seven-year-old girl. This is especially true in scenes that allow discomfort to morph into outright terror. In another key scene from the first part of the novel, the girl watches with glee as servants unload a cornucopia of crops from the family's highland estate. Back in the kitchen, the girl's nanny lifts up her skirt (*tzec*) to reveal an open wound on her leg, which she says is the result of a curse placed on her by the sorcerers at the estate as punishment for her loyalty to the family. At this point in the novel, the reader still isn't aware of what is going on at the estate, and so the appearance of the curse and wound present themselves as somewhat inscrutable and strange. But the worst is yet to come: The girl, suddenly overcome by fright, jumps into her nanny's lap, knowing that by doing so she is digging into a wound: "A wound, and it's we who've opened it" (20). There is no escape here—the fright the girl feels at the mention of the curse gives way, on a deeper level, to the knowledge that her own family is behind it. A crisis of identification begins to emerge as well, as the girl recognizes that her relationship with her nanny is simultaneously constituted by care and antagonism.

And indeed, the ultimate referent for the terror unfolding around the girl is the bonded labor relation between ladinos and "Indians," outside of which ladinos would themselves cease to exist. Here I am drawing from the literary critic Richard Godden's analysis of William Faulkner's transmutation of the disintegrating bond between white planters and black sharecroppers into a literary style that "secreted" symptoms into Faulkner's novels in the 1930s. For Godden, against the backdrop of the decline of sharecropping and rise of wage labor in the US South during the New Deal, Faulkner's fiction was able to reveal a traumatic hidden truth of plantation society: That the white world was "made" by black labor, and that, as a result, whites were nothing but "blacks in whiteface."[28] Drawing from a Hegelian master/slave dialectic, Godden identifies this painful recognition as the "labor trauma" at the core of Faulkner's fiction. This truth was

> everywhere evident in the objects and persons of a white-owned world made by black work, but everywhere occluded—since the acknowledgment that white depends on black (rather than vice-versa) would turn the world the white world owners didn't make upside down.[29]

While the idea that black labor made white existence was always a suppressed truth of the plantation order, it was only with the collapse of sharecropping that it could seep into Faulkner's fiction.

Balún Canán never undergoes the degree of narrative disintegration that occurs in Faulkner's best-known novels. And yet the consonant labor trauma produces uncanny effects, as ladino characters come to the realization that they are, perhaps, nothing more than "Indians in whiteface." The sluicing of this fear into consciousness, I would argue, is ultimately what gives parts 1 and 3 of the novel their gothic character; or, in alternate terms, the horror assailing the landed class becomes partially available through the seven-year-old girl's narration.

The traumatic recognition of the fine line separating ladino masters from their indigenous servants begins to emerge in the first chapter of the novel, which stages a conversation between the young narrator and her nanny. The chapter itself opens with the nanny's voice, as she recalls the acts of dispossession of her tribe: "And then in anger they dispossessed us, they confiscated what we had treasured: the word, which is memory's strong-box. Ever since that day they have burned and been eaten up with great logs of the hearth … Only the ash remains, and it has no face" (9). The nanny's story is quickly interrupted, though, by the girl's voice, who introduces herself as narrator ("I'm a little girl and I'm seven years old"), and begins to relate a quotidian episode revolving around hair brushing and breakfast. But, as a general rule of this novel, the quotidian is no less filled with violence than the tale interrupted by the girl:

> Does Nana know I hate her when she combs my hair? No, she doesn't. She doesn't know anything. She's Indian, she doesn't wear shoes, and she has no other garment under the blue cloth of her *tzec*. She isn't ashamed. She says the ground doesn't have any eyes.

At breakfast, the girl becomes afraid of what lies beyond the table; "there may be a looking glass," a reflective metaphor that stands in direct opposition to the ground the nanny says doesn't have eyes. And indeed, it is the girl—in this specific instance, but also in the novel as a whole—who will find herself suspended in a terrifying mirror game with the "Indian" as both absolute Other and uncanny double. When the nanny entreats the girl to drink the (white) milk produced by a Swiss cow, she brattily refuses, saying that she wants to drink (brown) coffee "like you. Like everyone." The nanny, without missing a beat, responds: "You'll turn Indian." The

woman employs this threat in an almost offhand manner, as a means to an end in a series of daily negotiations with her charge. The girl, however, takes this possibility as a serious injunction, and the chapter ends with her silently vowing that "tomorrow there'll be no more spilt milk" (14). In this mirror game, the ladina self is simultaneously sustained and threatened with annulment by the "Indian." There is no one more intimately linked to the girl than her nanny: Beneath the color-coded opposition between milk as "white" and coffee as "Indian," the girl herself has been reared on her nanny's breastmilk, a common arrangement in societies organized around racialized bonded labor. At the same time, however, she knows, as if on a molecular level, that she cannot—must not—"turn Indian."[30] But in some sense, to return to Godden's insights, the battle is already lost, insofar as the girl simultaneously understands and suppresses the fact that her world is "Indian-made."

But if "Indians" make the ladino world, they might also, in a moment of crisis, unmake it, through acts of revenge, transforming the mirror game of identification into something much more terrifying for the landed class. To borrow a concept from María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, ladinos viewed their indigenous servants as simultaneously "faithful" and "unfaithful," or in this particular case, as both docile bonded servants and foci of insurrection that would tear ladinos apart if given the chance.[31] As the historian Carmen Legorreta Díaz has noted, ladinos were driven by an "ancestral fear" of indigenous rebellion, which they termed "caste war."[32] These fears had as their most direct referent the massive feat of resistance Maya rebels waged against dispossession and forced labor in the Yucatán Peninsula between 1847 and 1901. In what became one of the longest-running indigenous rebellions in the hemisphere, rebels succeeded in occupying the southern part of the peninsula, to the horror of the white and mestizo minority. In Chiapas, where news from Yucatán was a constant source of anxiety from landowners, a smaller series of rebellions between 1867 and 1870 stoked fears that an all-out "caste war" would come to the region.

Balún Canán reveals that these ancestral fears were revived in the 1930s in relation to the threat of land and labor reform. Fear of destruction at the hands of (former) servants permeates the girl's narrative in the form of shrill warnings and tortured silences, but it also crystallizes into episodes of psychosis that reveal the structuring fantasies of ladino (non)existence. In

part 3 of the novel, in the aftermath of the rebellion on the estate, the girl's mother, Zoraida, comes to believe that her son Mario is being "eaten" by sorcerers at the family estate. As mentioned above, the curse first appeared when the nanny lifted her skirt to show the girl the wound the sorcerers had inflicted to punish her for loyalty to the family. After the rebellion narrated in the middle section of the narrative, however, this curse reappears in part 3 but is now directed at the master's own family. The girl narrates an episode in which the nanny approaches Zoraida, sobbing, to tell her that sorcerers at Chactajal are now "eating" her son. Zoraida responds by beating the nanny with a comb and casting her out of the home, calling her an "upstart Indian" (218). The insult is inapt, not just because it is baldly racist, but because it is ultimately the ladina woman who, deep down, internalizes the "Indian" curse as a symptom of her all-consuming fears of dissolution. The girl narrates how Zoraida approaches a priest for counsel, who complains, in a fury, that members of his congregation bring children to him not to instruct them, "but only so the holy water can help to ward off the *nahuals* and evil spirits" (233, translation modified). According to this priest, ladinos believe more in the indigenous spirit world than in the Christian one. In another episode, the girl's mother takes Mario, whose health has in fact begun to deteriorate, to a medical doctor. After suggesting that Mario might have appendicitis, he writes a prescription for quinine, pointing to malaria as a possible culprit. Zoraida lets the paper fall to the ground however, having accepted her son's fate: "There's nothing we can do. Neither you nor anybody, Doctor. My son is being eaten by the sorcerers of Chactajal" (252).

Whether there are really witches "eating" Mario is not the point, but rather that his mother *believes* this to be the case. Imagining her son's destruction at the hands of Indians sorcerers, it just might be that Zoraida is recognizing—in distorted form—that the ladino world is in fact "Indian made," and that outside the bonded labor relation, ladinos are themselves nothing at all. This entire class perspective, we might say, is bewitched, not by Maya sorcerers, but by the system of bonded labor that, in moments of coming undone, manifests itself as a form of psychosis among members of the landed class. Under such conditions, it becomes difficult to imagine how the seven-year-old narrator might mature as a member of this class, whose entire existence seems to be unraveling. The girl's voice, in its individual and partial rendering of reality unfolding around her, brilliantly

registers this crisis of class reproduction, and in so doing asks which new perspectives might emerge from its ashes.

The Historical Novel, Contained: Oligarchic Persistence

The possibility of a perspective beyond that of a symptom-ridden landed class is already present in the omnisciently narrated historical novel that blasts apart the first-person bildungsroman, flooding it with gothic effects. As noted, this middle section of the novel calls on the realist forms pioneered by authors in the wake of the Mexican Revolution—notably, the so-called novel of the revolution and *indigenismo*. Beyond the novel's sheer content, it is through the deployment of these forms that the true historical horizon of the novel is revealed as the world-historical force unleashed by the Mexican Revolution, whose energies, however belatedly, arrived in Chiapas in the 1930s. In like manner, the deployment of these realist genres allows Castellanos to forge a new, widened perspective in part 2 that distinguishes itself from the individual and self-consciously incomplete oligarchic perspective active in the novel's opening and closing movements.

At times, the widened perspective in part 2 of *Balún Canán* bears a resemblance to the one we associate with the nineteenth-century European historical novel, in its attempt to evoke "typical" characters within a changing social landscape, in the production of a small-scale model of social totality. In one scene, for example, the landowner César takes Ernesto on a tour of the estate, a common site of realist description in Latin American fiction. He points out the old sugar mill and explains that abundant labor means that it's not worth updating: "If we need to, we can always press an Indian into service" (85, translation modified.) As an aside, he offers Ernesto sexual access to any of the indigenous women on the estate. In an engrossing subplot, we see how César's unmarried sister, Matilde, becomes embroiled in an affair with her half-nephew Ernesto, to whom she is equally attracted and repulsed because he is her social inferior. This perspective is opened up even more, however, through the representation of indigenous characters such as the leader Felipe, who travels to a lowland coffee plantation to work and becomes radicalized when he sees the president of Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas, give a fiery speech against landowner abuses (a real event that occurred in 1934). Felipe's wife,

Juana, in turn, feels neglected by her husband and anguished by her inability to have a child. Suspending for the moment the historical accuracy of such depictions, an element invariably at stake in realist representation, we can see that this part of the narrative attempts to achieve a certain degree of objectivity with respect to the social world it depicts. By objectivity, I do not mean transparency (all representation, realist or otherwise, is heavily mediated), but rather distance from the individual and necessarily clouded perspective of the seven-year-old girl in parts 1 and 3.

This widened perspective, in turn, draws its narrative energies from the collective agency of the oppressed: in this case, the bonded indigenous laborers on the estate who, in a classic plot of indigenist literature, rise up against their masters. This collectivity is in turn evoked through an indigenous storytelling mode that already emerged in part 1 of the novel, when the nanny told the girl the story of her tribe. In the case of the rebellion narrated in part 2, though, the story is not interrupted but instead serves as a catalyst for action. In the remarkable chapter that recounts the burning of the hated sugar mill, Castellanos employs a collective-indigenous voice to relate a longer story of colonial dispossession: "Those who first knew this land said in their own tongue, 'Chactajal,' which means 'The Place of Much Water'" (180). When the occupiers arrived, they gave new names to things: "Our Lady of Health: that was the name of the feast days, unpronounceable to the Indians because it was just as foreign to them as the big house and the chapel and the sugar-mill" (181). With these new names comes a new concept, private property: "The ladinos measured the land and fenced it, and they set their landmarks as far as it was possible to say 'It is mine' … And for the sugar-mill they measured out a generous distance which year after year the canefields spread and covered" (181–2). Remarkably, the oral register morphs seamlessly into a form of omniscience that brings us into the present day: The sugar mill springs into action "with a monotonous creaking, while round it circled the old blindfolded mules, and in the canefields the Indians waved their knives quick as lightning in the sharp cane leaves" (182). The landowner, meanwhile, observes "from a distance" (182). All is quiet and still. It is then that the first flames erupt and begin to engulf the mill.

Castellanos thus creates a narrative perspective that fuses an indigenous storytelling mode with the powers of omniscience itself: The story of the estate, the novel seems to be telling us, can be told only from the

perspective of the dispossessed. And yet, dialectically speaking, the clarity offered by this emergent perspective remains welded to the landed perspective it seems poised to displace. After masterfully ventriloquizing the collective history that culminates in that single day of rebellion, the narrative perspective shifts yet again, to one fixated on the grotesque and frightening excess generated by the event. Animals die horrific deaths; a calf, for example, tries to escape the flames by throwing itself into a barbed-wired fence, "tearing its pelt each time it tried to break free, lowing with eyes starting out of its sockets, until a sudden leap of flame put an end to its agony" (184). Meanwhile, the narrative voice, still omniscient but far less infused with a collective sense of history, takes the reader inside the Indian huts, where women fall to their knees "with red bespattered faces, their long hair disheveled, their jaws hungry, and their hearts ignorant of law" (185). With this, Estelle Tarica has pointed out, the narrative swerves into tropes of indigenous lawlessness and savagery.[33]

It is thus that a distinctly landed perspective reemerges within the collective energies animating the historical novel at the center of *Balún Canán*. Additional evidence for this claim can be found in the fact that the plot of part 2 more closely resembles ladina *fantasies* of indigenous rebellion than any historical event that actually took place in the 1930s. As noted earlier, both land and labor reform were applied in Chiapas for just two years before the government went into retreat. During that time, nothing remotely like the rebellion depicted in *Balún Canán* ever took place in Chiapas. Of course, realist does not mean mimetic; but this mode does require fidelity to historical tendencies. And while it would be possible to imagine an indigenous rebellion against a hated sugar mill as a kind of utopian wish fulfillment on the part of the author, it is more likely that it is an expression of landowner—not indigenous—legends: the aforementioned ancestral fear of what ladinos called "caste war." With this, the hysteria of the landed class—pilloried to great effect in parts 1 and 2 of the novel—reasserts itself as landowner fantasy disguised as realism.

But if the landed perspective embedded in *Balún Canán* is the novel's greatest ideological limitation, it is also, viewed from a different angle, a source of great insight into the failure of 1930s land reform to overturn master/servant bonds in Chiapas. The novel does point to the vulnerability of this bond insofar as a collective history blasts open a story of oligarchic self. Dialectically speaking, however, the novel's three-part organization

attests to the extent to which master/servant relations continued to exert their hold: The story of indigenous rebellion remains literally attached to, or trapped within, a story of oligarchic selfhood. In this manner, the novel generates a genuine sense of historical movement but also reflects a blockage. *Balún Canán* mobilizes, recoils from, and revels in the "morbid symptoms" that result from the impasse. No immediate exit seems available, at least from the oligarchic perspective the novel excoriates but ultimately cannot transcend.

The Self, Unbound

And yet, to return one final time to the significance of the novel's three-part structure, a possible exit does present itself by way of the bildungsroman plot. For if on the one hand the bisection of the bildungsroman by a historical novel disrupts its operation, the boundary demarcating the two storylines preserves an individual solution uniquely available to the girl narrator. Near the end of the third section of the novel, this plot reaches its own denouement: The girl, after being separated from her nanny, sees her on the street. The girl runs to the woman, excited, only to be met with a blank stare, either because the girl is mistaken or because the nanny chooses not to acknowledge her former charge. The girl rationalizes that it must not have been her nanny; after all, she notes, "all Indians look alike" (271). In a resolution that recurs in Latin American narrative, the upper-class subject reaches maturity by renouncing the intimate racialized or class Other.[34] We are barred from understanding what this renunciation looks like from the nanny's perspective; but in the girl's case, her sensation of loss is accompanied by one of autonomy. Immediately following this scene, the short final chapter recounts how she scribbled the name of her dead brother Mario on the wall. Others have read this scene as either an affirmation of feminist autonomy through writing, or, in a more critical vein, a colonially inflected disidentification with indigeneity.[35] It also offers, I propose, a final escape from the psychosis-inducing bonded labor relation at the very center of Chiapanecan society. The writing subject, detached from those bonds, might become something of a free agent. In this sense, the conclusion of *Balún Canán*, like that of Lins's *Bangüê*, points toward the constitution of a bourgeois rather than oligarchic individual. But while in Lins this

transformation occurred by way of the literal sale of an estate, in Castellanos it passes, as in classic liberal political economy, through the possession of the self.

From this vantage point, the novel's inability to integrate the story of the (oligarchic) individual with the story of an (indigenous) collectivity presents itself as a solution to the larger historical impasse it investigates: These two storylines must remain separate so that the girl's selfhood can become something other than a morbid symptom of class decline. This exit strategy resonates on some level with Rosario Castellanos's own trajectory as a writer: Leaving Chiapas for Mexico City was ultimately what allowed her to become a writer and feminist. Increasingly, after writing her Chiapas Trilogy, Castellanos would gravitate toward problems of urban and bourgeois female selfhood rather than the pathologies of bonded labor on estates, even as she continued to rely upon the domestic labor of Maya servants from Chiapas with personal connections to her family.[36] This trajectory was, more than a matter of biography, though, an expression of a wider process of class realignment in Mexico following the revolution.

But what of the oligarchy itself? The individual exit strategy pursued by *Balún Canán* provides brilliant insights into the pathologies of this class, but its individual resolution leaves the final fate of the oligarchy in a state of suspension. The girl's father travels to the state capital, where little help from the government is forthcoming; moreover, the family is in a state of debt to urban merchants, suggesting that a new class is on its way to dominance. The landed class is on life support but not destroyed. If we turn briefly to Castellanos's subsequent novel, *The Book of Lamentations* (1962), however, we can see some signs of resuscitation. Like *Balún Canán*, this later work is a "contained" historical novel insofar as it reproduces a landed fantasy of indigenous rebellion, this time by transporting an apocryphal nineteenth-century narrative about the indigenous crucifixion of a child into the 1930s era of land reform. But its examination of the 1930s is insightful to the extent that it devises a strategy for the landed class to retain dominance. By the end of the novel, members of the landed class have wielded paramilitary violence to end the indigenous rebellion; they have also succeeded in integrating themselves into the workings of the post-revolutionary state, which after the 1930s would generally leave management of Chiapas to old elites.[37] And so if *Balún Canán* reveals how people might exit the pathology-inducing social

relations of ladino society, *The Book of Lamentations* gestures toward how the class itself might adapt and survive.

This survival would extend beyond Castellanos's death in 1971 (incidentally, from an electrical accident she suffered while serving as Mexico's ambassador to Israel). In the 1950s, when Castellanos was writing about Chiapas, about half the region's indigenous population remained in servitude on estates; it was only in the 1970s that wage labor became dominant.[38] Meanwhile, landowners continued to subject indigenous people to horrific abuses, sparking guerrilla movements that would culminate in the Zapatista rebellion in 1994.[39] As an indication of this continued antagonism, one of the Zapatistas' first actions was to kidnap the general and former governor of Chiapas, Absalón Castellanos Domínguez (Rosario Castellanos's cousin), and try him for the torture and assassination of indigenous activists during his administration. (He was later released unharmed.) But if the Chiapanecan landed class did not disappear with land reform, it did not exactly flourish either. The high period of Mexican industrialization in the 1940s to 1970s, followed by neoliberalism in the 1990s, marked a decline perhaps less intense than that imagined by Castellanos in the 1930s but irrevocable nonetheless.

This long decline would, in turn, continue to produce ever-more lurid symptoms. An anecdote recounted by the historian Aaron Bobrow-Strain powerfully demonstrates this point: Sometime in the early 2000s, he interviewed an octogenarian ladino man whose family's decline led him to become a temporary agricultural worker (*bracero*) picking garlic in the US. As a reminder of his status as a ladino, however, he carried around his removed prostate in a jar of cane liquor, "in order to show the *naturales* (Indians) that their witchcraft and superstitions are a thing of the past."[40] It is difficult to imagine a more degraded, obscene, and unintentionally humorous rendering of landowner decline in the contemporary era. For, as Castellanos's *Balún Canán* cannily reveals, it is ladinos who are avid believers in a particularly pernicious form of witchcraft, handily revealed here by a floating prostate wielded to prove the superiority of ladinos over "Indians." Read today, Castellanos's novel allows us to appreciate the sordid spectacle of ladino self-bewitchment long after the class that conjured it had finally died, and long after the landed perspective embedded in Latin American novels had given way to new ones.

II

Vías Campesinas

3

How Do Peasants Become (Doubly) Free? The Modern Agrarian Epic

The essential aim of the novel is the representation of the way society moves.
Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*

The Novel “From Below”

Chapters 1 and 2 opened with the comings and goings of landowners, protagonists par excellence of a wide swathe of twentieth-century Latin American literature, as they navigated shifting fortunes along a winnowing landowner road to capitalism. The point of entry for this chapter is a very different kind of protagonist, of newer vintage than the landowner: a peasant seeking freedom from an oppressive rural social order. The famous opening of Mariano Azuela’s *Los de abajo* (*The Underdogs*) offers an emblematic example of this new protagonist. Smallholder Demetrio Macías’s home in the Juchipila Canyon of Zacatecas comes under attack by the Mexican army. Leaving his wife, child, and agricultural implements behind, he straps a cartridge belt to his waist, grabs a rifle, and steps out “slowly, deliberately, disappearing into the impenetrable darkness of the night” to join the Mexican Revolution, a world-historical agrarian struggle in which he will rise, to become, briefly, a general in Pancho Villa’s popular army.[1] Thrown into the chaos of battle, Demetrio’s own destiny becomes

intertwined with those of other characters, also born in the crucible of revolution: among them, bourgeois opportunists, decorated military men, and liberated women fighters.

The previous chapters of this book focused on the predominance of a landowner perspective in certain twentieth-century agrarian novels; this section, "Vías Campesinas," or "Peasant Roads," examines how challenges to landowner rule created a different center of gravity for the novel and, with it, the possibility of a literary perspective grounded in the region's exploited peasant majorities. Focusing on works by Mariano Azuela in Mexico and José María Arguedas in Peru, I show how two key literary currents—the novel of the Mexican Revolution and Andean *indigenismo*—developed perspectives "from below." This new perspective in turn allowed novelists to pose and answer a new but equally crucial agrarian question: how peasants might gain freedom from the large estate and, just as importantly, what might happen after that. The novel of the Mexican Revolution is a broad category designating works that thematize this event in some way: in its narrowest definition, depictions of armed struggle; in its most expansive, any novel that deals with the revolution's aftereffects (that is, basically any Mexican novel written between the 1920s and the 1960s). Twentieth-century Andean *indigenista* novels, by contrast, are most often defined as works about indigenous oppression written by nonindigenous writers. Beyond these mainly thematic designations, however, I want to approach key works in these currents as laying the foundation for the emergence of a new narrative form in Latin America, one I call agrarian epic.

My designation of agrarian epic takes as its point of departure Georg Lukács's analysis of the historical novel, a term that in his analysis became interchangeable with realism itself. For Lukács, the historical novel became newly possible in nineteenth-century Europe as the result of bourgeois revolutions; specifically, the French Revolution strengthened "the feeling … that there is such a thing as history"; with this, "the national idea becomes the property of the broadest masses."[2] With this, authors such as Sir Walter Scott, Honoré de Balzac, and Leo Tolstoy were able, in different ways, to produce works that displayed a stunning degree of sensitivity to historical movement. At the same time, in a world conquered by the bourgeoisie—and its key social form, money—the historical novel offered a mediated and partial means of evoking totality. It was thus that the

historical novel emerged as a modern form of epic able to evoke “the way society moves” as a (fragmented) whole.[3]

The popular energies Lukács credits with fueling the nineteenth-century historical novel were largely unavailable in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Latin America, where independence had perpetuated rather than destroyed colonial structures, especially in the countryside. This continuation ensured that an elite, often landed, perspective dominated the novel. As Roberto Schwarz has argued, French realism was something of an impossibility in nineteenth-century Brazil, where slavery and patronage made a mockery of formal freedom and naked individualism alike. Tellingly, in Schwarz’s analysis, the contradictions of such a society could be revealed to great effect, but not by adopting either a popular perspective or the structure of the historical novel. Instead, Schwarz shows, the great nineteenth-century writer Machado de Assis was able to “capture contemporary society in motion” by adopting the perspective of the slaveowner and patriarch, an adoption that in turn produced a kind of realism “with anti-realist devices.”[4]

It stands to reason, though, that at other moments in history more popular perspectives might become available as insightful standpoints for evoking social movement. Twentieth-century revolutions in Mexico and Russia really did make history, at least for a time, “the property of the broadest masses” in Latin America and elsewhere, creating fertile soil for the reinvention of the historical novel. This is certainly not to say that the historical novel as conceived by Lukács is the only literary mode able to apprehend movement: as Schwarz’s analyses reveal, Machado de Assis’s nineteenth-century novels did so through an approach to Brazilian realism that was profoundly “anti-realist.” Latin American novels did not simply reproduce European realisms from a century earlier, if for no other reason than because history always proceeds through radically uneven terrain to produce unique results, whether in the realm of social life or in the pages of a novel. Instead, my insistence on the reinvention of the historical novel in twentieth-century Latin America, is, well, historical, in that it seeks to designate a mode of representation that became available during cycles of pronounced agrarian mobilization and upheaval in twentieth-century Latin America, and, by the same token, unavailable once those cycles had ended. Such an enlivened sense of historicity, as I explore throughout this chapter, allowed novels to become modern epics, but not in any generic sense;

instead, they became modern agrarian epics charged with evoking peasantries on the move, in an unprecedented quest for liberation.

Here it is important to stress that critics have most often viewed the epic realist vein running through twentieth-century Latin American fiction as something of an anachronism. As shorthand for this understanding of realism, the critic Gerald Martin quips that the Peruvian novelist Ciro Alegría's sprawling indigenista epic *Broad and Alien Is the World*, published in 1941, is "one of Latin America's best nineteenth-century novels."[5] The assumption here is that the proliferation of realisms well into the twentieth century in Latin America marks the region as out of date according to some ideal progression of forms. But as I explore here, Azuela and Arguedas did not adopt realism as by default; instead, it was a practice that each author had to discover in conjunction with concrete historical developments. And while, especially in the case of Arguedas and other indigenista authors, the mode of realism they employ is often understood as aesthetically naïve (as in Julio Cortázar's well-known dismissal of Arguedas's works as "provincial"), such an understanding fails to recognize the complexity and range of realist aesthetics. As Jed Esty and Colleen Lye have shown, a Cold War narrative that associated modernism with Western freedom, and realism with Soviet conformity, has blocked us from appreciating the complexity of the realist modes that flourished in the world's peripheries.[6] For this reason, Joe Cleary notes, "We need, but lack, comprehensive theories and historical atlases of twentieth-century realism."[7]

As part of this wider attempt to create a historical atlas of twentieth-century peripheral realism, this chapter traces how Azuela and Arguedas discovered an epic mode dedicated to charting complex and contradictory processes of peasant freedom. First, I examine how the sudden irruption of the Mexican Revolution forced Azuela out of an earlier, naturalist-inflected malaise to discover a more dynamic realist project in his 1915 classic, *Los de abajo*. With this novel, Azuela was able to overcome his petty bourgeois predilections to depict, for the first time in Mexican and possibly Latin American literature, peasants as agents of history. While this novel is quite short (a scant 130 pages), one of its chief accomplishments is its epic depiction of the rise and fall of peasant insurgency in relation to a weak but treacherous Mexican bourgeoisie. I then turn to examine how Arguedas's twin commitments to socialist internationalism and indigenous liberation

allowed him to develop an even greater sensitivity to historical movement in his novel *Yawar Fiesta*. The chief accomplishment of this novel was to adapt realism to the collective character of Andean indigenous society, while at the same time examining how this collective was changing in the present. Under conditions of constant change, indigenous people might achieve true liberation, but they also might experience what Marx called "freedom in the double sense"—that is, the negative freedom that hails from a separation from both land and community.[8] As a mark of the modern agrarian epics I study in this chapter, such outcomes were not dictated in advance; this was why the form emerged in the first place, to glimpse where peasantries were headed, and what might happen next.

A Realist Revolution

The historical novel is not a default mode; much less is it one that follows the same sequence everywhere. Instead, as Roberto Schwarz has noted more broadly,

> literary forms may not mean the same in the core and at the periphery of our world. Time can become so uneven, when it is stretched far across space, that artistic forms which are already dead in the first may still be alive in the second.[9]

Take, for example, the case of the Mexican novelist Mariano Azuela, who, in keeping with the vogue of the pre-revolutionary Porfirian era, began his literary trajectory as a naturalist, but discovered a new kind of realism, epic in character, with the onset of the Mexican Revolution. This trajectory from naturalism to realism, we should note, was totally out of sync with European literary history, where realism yielded to naturalism in a clear sequence. But, in the case of Azuela at least, naturalism gave way to realism, long after the latter had run out of steam in its European site of origin. Or, as Leticia Magda Garza-Falcón has put it, playing on Lukács's well-known opposition between realism and naturalism, Azuela began to "narrate" only after he "described."[10]

Azuela's beginnings as a naturalist writer owe a great deal to the conditions established under Porfirio Díaz's thirty-year dictatorship, known as the *Porfiriato*. During this period, Mexican elites' belief in scientific

“progress,” coupled with their pessimism regarding the country’s masses’ ability to fulfill that mission on racial, hygienic, and moral grounds, seems to have sustained naturalism well beyond its expiration date in Europe. At the same time, the decades-long *Pax Porfiriana* fomented a vision of historical immutability that overlapped with naturalistic determinism. This is not to say that the period itself was static; to the contrary, the Porfirian era was marked by a sped-up modernization with massive railway construction and foreign investment that forever transformed Mexico. This modernizing drive depended, in turn, upon the vast dispossession of the country’s indigenous-peasantry majority and brutal subjection to the rule of the hacienda system. Though this dispossession had begun during an earlier phase of liberalism known as the mid-nineteenth-century *Reforma*, it reached its height under the Díaz regime. As Alan Knight notes, by 1910, “Four-fifths of Mexican rural communities and nearly half the rural population were located within hacienda boundaries”; according to some estimates, some 90 percent of people in the heavily populated central plateau had been rendered landless.[11] But while the *Porfiriato* was a period of rapid upheaval and transformation, the dominant literary mode of the era, naturalism, tended to evoke stagnancy rather than movement.

This stunted historical sensibility is pronounced in Azuela’s early novel *Mala yerba* (Weeds, 1909), one of a spate of naturalist works he wrote before the revolution. While long forgotten, this novel is relevant because it identifies the hacienda complex as a site of shocking oppression, while at the same time failing to imagine that anything might be done to remedy it. The novel takes place nearly entirely on a large rural estate and depicts a landowner’s untrammeled patriarchal authority: As part of the plot, he kills a beautiful peon when she resists his advances, then kills her love interest after he comes seeking vengeance, crimes that are met with total indifference by the law. In contrast with the kind of landowner romance studied in chapter 1, which in Mexico is represented by novels such as José López Portillo y Rojas’s *La parcela* (The plot, 1898), Azuela’s *Mala yerba* refuses to hide the brutality of the landed regime.[12] Born into a family of petty merchants and landowners, and later educated as a medical doctor, Azuela was never an apologist for the latifundio system in the same way as Portillo y Rojas (or, for that matter, as examined in chapter 1, an urban middle-class reformist like Rómulo Gallegos). Azuela’s critique, however, was limited by his naturalist-inflected assumption that the landed system

would never change. In *Mala yerba*, landowners become stand-ins for "the eternal triumph of the strong" (28), an idea that in turn is buttressed by the title's evocation of the popular saying "mala yerba nunca muere" (literally, weeds never die).[13] Peons on the estate, in turn, are identified as "sick" after "centuries of humiliation and bitterness."[14] Such observations are reproduced on the level of style, as interminable descriptions of atavistic traits and corrosive influences appear as thick sludge through which little if any historical movement can be detected.

But history did move, and spectacularly so: Just two years after publishing *Mala yerba*, the revolution shattered the Pax Porfiriana and with it the landowner road to capitalism it had consolidated. This transformation allowed Azuela to discover a new literary perspective—that of the oppressed and exploited peasantry—and with it, a radically new kind of realist practice in *Los de abajo*. The novel, first published in El Paso, Texas, in 1915 and ignored until the 1920s, recounts the rise and fall of a band of insurgents led by the smallholder Demetrio Macías during crucial phases of the armed conflict. As an initial example of the dramatic transformation of Azuela's ability to evoke this historical movement, we can turn to a memorable passage from the first part of the novel, in which Demetrio Macías and his band gallop through a canyon on their way to Zacatecas, where they will eventually meet up with Pancho Villa's famed Northern Division:

> The men filled their lungs deeply, as if they were trying to breathe in the vast horizon, the immensity of the sky, the blueness of the mountains, and the fresh air infused with the sweet fragrances of the Sierra. They galloped on their horses as if they could thus take possession of all the land with their unrestrained running. Who among them thought then of the severe chief of police, of the grumbling gendarme, or the pompous cacique? Who then thought any more of their wretched shack of a house, where one lives like a slave, always under the watch of the owner or the surly, cruel majordomo? Who among them thought at that point of always having to be up before sunrise, with shovel and basket in hand, or lugging plow and goad, ready to go out and earn one's daily serving of atole and frijoles? (48)

Notably, the perspective embedded in this passage is no longer that of a moralizing bourgeois observer within a frozen historical context, as it was in Azuela's earlier naturalist works, but one in which unprecedented possibilities emerge: The landowner is gone from the scene, and formerly shackled peasants begin to act of their own accord, "as if they could … take possession of all the land." Even though Demetrio and his band are for the

most part smallholders or townspeople from a particular region (the Juchipila Canyon of Zacatecas), the narrator invokes them as a stand-in for all the dispossessed and abused cultivators in Mexico. Indeed, “Mexico” becomes apprehensible as a totality in intimate relation to a common struggle. This passage, to be sure, reveals Azuela at his most utopian, and there will be ample opportunity to trace its relapse into pessimism below. For the moment, though, we can appreciate that history is on the move, its unfolding only available from the perspective of peasants engaged in an unprecedented, and indeed epic, struggle against the old order.

By his own account, Azuela’s discovery of this new perspective was made possible by his direct participation in the Mexican Revolution, the first agrarian revolution in world history. This event lasted ten years, stretched across nearly the entire country, and claimed at least a million lives. Azuela himself, of course, was not a peasant insurgent, much less a champion of the radical demands for land redistribution that emerged from within its ranks. Instead, the author was a dyed-in-the-wool liberal whose support for the revolution took the early form of Maderismo, so named after Francisco Madero, the landowner, petty industrialist, and liberal reformer from the northern state of Coahuila. Madero led the first phase of the revolution by forcing Díaz into exile in 1911. Key to Madero’s ideology was a critique of political unfreedom under Díaz, summed up by the slogan “free suffrage and no re-election.” While cognizant of the miserable conditions of the country’s peasant majority, he believed firmly in a liberal solution to the agrarian problem, through small property ownership rather than outright expropriation and redistribution of estates.[15] But the assassination of Madero in 1913 by the Porfirian general Victoriano Huerta ignited a new, much more explosive phase of the revolution, in which bourgeois reformists briefly united with the peasant armies led by Emiliano Zapata in the South and Pancho Villa in the North in an effort to defeat Huerta’s counterrevolution. It was thus that Azuela, a lifelong liberal, came to join Pancho Villa’s army as a medical doctor after an attack on his hometown by Huerta’s forces. At its height, Villa’s army was composed of some 50,000 fighters spread out over a third of the country’s territory, constituting a popular force the likes of which had never been seen.[16] And while the political currents united under the banner of Villismo varied widely (more on this in a moment), it is safe to say that their radical demands for land far exceeded the bourgeois framework to which Azuela

remained committed. Crucially, however, as is the case of the best realists, *Los de abajo* cannot be reduced to the author's liberal ideology; instead, the novel often achieves a rather stunning degree of objectivity in its narration of events.

A vivid example of this objectivity can be found in another of the novel's most famous scenes, also from part 1, in which a group of peasant insurgents trade among themselves an Olivetti typewriter they have looted from a bourgeois home. Over the course of a single morning, the omniscient narrator reports, the typewriter has changed hands five times, decreasing in price with each new owner. The narrator then zeroes in on one character, Cordorniz, who buys the typewriter for the sheer pleasure of striking it against the rocks. What happens next is as unexpected as it is spectacular:

> This was like a signal: everyone who had been carrying heavy or awkward objects began to get rid of them, smashing them against the rocks. Shards of glass and fragments of porcelain flew about everywhere. Bulky mirrors, brass candelabra, elegant little statues, fine china, and all the other superfluous things from the day's "advance" ended up shattered and abandoned along the road. (62)

The narrative voice allows a spontaneous reality to unfold. Remarkably, it does so by internalizing a peasant perspective on the objects. Attractive but ultimately useless to their new owners, they are matter-of-factly described as "superfluous" and "heavy." The imported trophies of Porfirian "civilization"—ranging from porcelain and mirrors to Italian typewriters—are subjected to a peasant use economy that literally brings them back down to earth. Rather than report these events with pearl-clutching horror, Azuela allows them to unfold without judgment. Or, as Carlos Monsiváis has noted with respect to the same scene, the author's liberal viewpoint becomes "entranced."[17]

The narrative perspective in *Los de abajo*, entranced as it was by peasant insurrection, pierces the veil of an emergent and inchoate reality marked by an unprecedented overturning of previous social relations: At least for the moment, armed peasants generate an unruly, uncontainable social force that has blasted the present wide open. At times, this force is so violent that it draws the novel into a direction that seems quite at odds with realist practice. Early critics, for example, continually pointed to formlessness and chaos as defining characteristics of the novel, in a manner consonant with the conservative critique of the revolution as senseless in its wanton

violence.[18] Indeed, there is ample evidence for this view in the pages of the novel: Its many instances of looting, drunkenness, and destruction, for example, threaten to transform a quest for liberation into libertinism. In keeping with this sense of unpredictability, different characters refer to the revolution as a "hurricane" and "volcano," natural phenomena that refute the idea of any unified human action—much less political intentionality—organizing its chaos. This instability has been aligned, in turn, with the novel's fragmentary and episodic style, which, according to the author, was the result of a composition so rapid that the book "wrote itself."[19] As Ignacio Sánchez Prado has noted, the first version of the novel, published in 1915, formalized this sense of spontaneity through its near-exclusive narration in the present tense; it was only in the definitive version published in 1925 that Azuela transformed it into the past tense. This fragmentary and immediate aesthetic, in turn, has been linked to its proto-modernist aesthetics. Sánchez Prado, for example, calls attention to Azuela's use of "estranging techniques to narrate … the baffling experience of being modern."[20] Max Parra, in turn, highlights the novel's reliance on "montage sequencing, quick cuts in action and setting, and a rapid, nervous tempo."[21]

At the same time, however, the novel's reliance on modernist techniques to evoke the chaos of the revolution coexists with an organization that gives a definite form to the chaos. Richard Young calls attention to the novel's meticulous, almost "mathematical" composition: twenty-one chapters in part 1, followed by another twenty-one chapters distributed between parts 2 and 3.[22] This symmetry is complemented in turn by the novel's circular beginning and ending in Demetrio Macías's birthplace, the Juchipila Canyon of Zacatecas. This, together with the novel's in medias res beginning, has led many critics to identify Azuela's novel as an epic of the Mexican Revolution.[23] This epic structure plots the rise and fall of the armed peasant insurrection between 1913 and 1915 in each of its three parts. In the first and longest part, Demetrio Macías leads a small band from the Juchipila Canyon in a heroic fight against the restorationist regime of Victoriano Huerta. The group is expanded with the addition of a bourgeois medical student, Luis Cervantes, who will become Macías's trusted aide-de-camp. This part culminates with Macías joining forces with Villa's army to defeat the Huerta regime in the Battle of Zacatecas in June 1914. In the second part, Macías's band grows in numbers, but also in aimlessness. In

the third and shortest section, the band breaks down in the aftermath of the Convention of Aguascalientes in October and November 1914, a watershed event that marked a violent split between, on the one hand, the bourgeois "constitutionalists" led by Venustiano Carranza and Álvaro Obregón and, on the other hand, the peasant-led armies of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. In this final section, Luis Cervantes takes his loot and moves to El Paso (the city where Azuela first published his novel). Demetrio Macías continues fighting, even though he no longer is sure why, until he and his remaining men are mowed down by the machine guns of Carranza's now more powerful army.

Formlessness and form, chaos and structure, "hurricanes" and history are thus the poles between which the novel oscillates. Upon closer inspection, these oscillations might be interpreted as marking a tension internal to realism as defined by Lukács: that between accident and inevitability.[24] Neither of the two can be isolated, but must instead be viewed in tandem. Focusing too much on the inchoate aspects of *Los de abajo* would result in a reading in which the politics of the Mexican Revolution become truly illegible, and hence available to a remoralization as senseless; or, in a subalternist vein, as generating an unassimilable "excess" that resists interpretation. A reading that focuses too much on internal necessity would sweep aside the novel's moments of indecision to home in on its devolution into pessimistic defeat. What makes *Los de abajo* a great novel, though, is its movement between these poles. For even though the novel ends on a note of senseless defeat, its internal composition works in the opposite direction, to reveal a specific trajectory toward that defeat. The novel's chief insights, in turn, hail not only from its attention to historical movement, but from the particular class dynamics that drive it. As the novel reveals, these class dynamics, in which bourgeois and peasant interests momentarily coalesce before separating, were not senseless but—in hindsight at least—necessary.

Los de abajo stages class conflict through the interaction of its two main characters: the peasant leader Demetrio Macías and the petty bourgeois medical student Luis Cervantes. The allegorical connotations of this pairing are clear: Demetrio recalls Demeter, the Greek goddess of agriculture; and Luis's surname links him to the first great modern work of literature, *Don Quixote*. At the same time, however, neither of these characters, in spite of these symbolic associations, are archetypes; instead, they might be viewed

as what Lukács named typical characters whose individuality derives from "the historical peculiarity of their age."[25] In this, we might add, Azuela's novel is very different from another classic novel of the Mexican Revolution, Martín Luis Guzmán's *El águila y la serpiente* (*The Eagle and the Serpent*, 1928), whose story focuses on the narrator's encounters with towering figures such as Pancho Villa and Álvaro Obregón. In *Los de abajo*, by contrast, such figures are mentioned but never appear in the flesh; the point of the novel is not to understand history as the work of "great men," but rather that of middling characters swept up in events beyond their control.

The conflict between Demetrio and Luis is frequently approached as one revolving around questions of culture and literacy, as registered through their differing mannerisms and speech patterns. But while surely relevant, this lexicon falls short of establishing the specific class positions they occupy in the novel, and, as a result, their possible range of motion. For Demetrio is something more specific than an illiterate subject, or even peasant for that matter: He is a property-owning peasant from the sierra of Zacatecas, whose contradictory action will hail from that position. In like manner, Luis is a bourgeois not simply because he is educated, but because he acts according to bourgeois self-interest. Let us consider each of these characters in relation to such specificities, which will in turn reveal the novel's powerful insights into the trajectory of the revolution itself.

We first meet Luis in part 1 of the novel, after he is captured by Demetrio's men. Taken to Demetrio, he delivers a speech in the overblown and flowery style recognizable as the voice of the Porfirian-era intellectual, insisting, lest they shoot him as an enemy, that he is a true "coreligionist" of the revolutionary cause. Demetrio, momentarily confused, responds, "¿A cor-e-a what?" (20). While it might first seem that the narrator is calling attention to Demetrio's lack of education, it soon becomes clear that the real target of the parody is Luis. Once Luis explains that "coreligionist" means that he fights for the same ideals as Demetrio, the latter smiles and asks him: "Well, tell me, then: what cause exactly are we fighting for?" Luis, "disconcerted" by Demetrio's question, doesn't have an answer (20). This is because Luis, in spite of his claims to patriotic disinterest, is always fighting for his own narrow self-interest. Confined to a corral while Demetrio and his men decide what to do with him, Luis reflects upon his

time on the other side of the struggle, as a federal soldier. In his first battle against the insurgents,

> He could swear upon the Holy Bible that when the soldiers had brought their Mausers up to take aim, someone behind him had stated in an extremely loud voice: “Every man for himself!” This was so clearly so that his own spirited, noble steed, which was otherwise accustomed to combat, had turned on its hind legs and galloped away, without stopping until they were at a very safe distance from where the firing of the rifles could be heard. (21–2)

This remembrance hilariously evokes, in a straight-faced manner, Luis’s very clear attempt to save his own skin (a performance that will be repeated twice more in the novel). Luis continues to recall how, as punishment for his desertion, he was sent to work in the camp’s kitchen. There he encounters captured peasant insurgents and is moved by “the suffering and the misery of the oppressed” (22), a compassion so great he even sheds tears for a dead mule. Noting his own hatred of the landed class, he resolves to desert the army and join the “sublime” cause. But another, less noble, motivation coexists with this newfound compassion for the poor. In an offhand manner, he recalls rumors of the “shiny, heavy gold coins” (23). Villa’s soldiers are paid, in contrast, with the worthless paper money circulating among the federal ranks. Though Luis never openly admits it, the narrative reveals that money, and not the suffering of the oppressed, is what motivates him. Luis’s self-righteous indignation at being locked up by Demetrio’s men is thus rendered with supreme irony: After “finally arriv[ing] to join my coreligionists, instead of welcoming me with open arms, they lock me up in a pigsty” (23).

Whether cynical or self-deluded, Luis’s appeals to sublime causes will always be accompanied by the self-interest of an ascendant petty bourgeoisie. This is not to say that all bourgeois characters are naked strivers in Azuela’s world. To the contrary, the author laments the replacement of a previous order of committed leaders in the mold of Andrés Madero by a gang of rapacious parvenus. This is indeed the contrast that moves Azuela’s first revolution-era novel, *Andrés Perez, maderista* (1911), in which the murder of a morally noble landowner allows an opportunist to take his place. In *Los de abajo*, something similar occurs in the contrast between Luis and Alberto Solís, an idealist who is killed by a stray bullet during the battle of Zacatecas. While this attempt to separate noble and ignoble sectors of the bourgeoisie is already ideological, Azuela is rather

clear-eyed about the assertion of material interest as the true force driving bourgeois action in the armed phase of the revolution.

Demetrio's actions evoke a rather different set of class interests, which will at different moments coalesce with and separate from those of his bourgeois counterpart. As a formal expression of this difference, we learn about Luis's interests from internal thought processes, while we learn about Demetrio's through dialogue. This is Demetrio, for example, explaining his origins to Luis: "I'm from Limón, a place very close to Moyahua, right in the middle of the Juchipila Canyon. I had my house, my cows, and a small piece of land to sow. In other words, I had everything I needed" (39). Demetrio, that is, had everything he needed; the only reason he joined the insurgency was because a local cacique, Don Mónico, sent *federales* to arrest him: "Sayin' that I was a Maderista and that I was about to rise up and join the revolution" (40). This false accusation essentially forced Demetrio to take up arms: "After that more an' more men have joined us, an' now here we are, as you see us. We go along fightin' as best as we can" (41). The laconic and straightforward style of Demetrio's speech creates an immediate contrast with Luis's flowery language, not just in relation to education, but as expressions of different interests: The peasant's clear-spoken goal of returning to his small plot of land, versus the petty bourgeois's use of high-flying patriotic language to hide his quest for social mobility and wealth. Additional understanding of Demetrio's class position, and the internal tensions within it, can be gleaned from his status as a *serrano* smallholder, and not—as was the preponderant position of Mexican peasants in the revolution—a landless peon or member of an indigenous agrarian community. Demetrio's status as a smallholder fits well within what Alan Knight terms the "polyclassist" makeup of Villismo, which ran the gamut from landless peasants and agricultural laborers to small *rancheros* and urban petty bourgeois. This class diversity stood in marked contrast with its Zapatista counterpart, which was characterized by strong indigenous communal ties.[26] Along these lines, while Demetrio is described in racial terms as "pure-race indigenous" (48), he no longer belongs to any community, which we may infer had been dissolved in a prior round of dispossession. In some manner, Demetrio's status as property owner, and hence individual in a bourgeois sense, is what allows him to emerge as a legible character for Azuela.[27] In larger terms, this propensity toward individuation rather than communalism is perhaps one reason Villismo has

figured much more prominently in the novel of the Mexican Revolution than Zapatismo, to such a degree as to become nearly synonymous with it. Yet for all his individual characteristics, Demetrio very much remains a peasant. It is precisely his attachment to a small plot of land and lack of interest in money that allow him, under the right circumstances, to emerge as a heroic figure worthy of epic treatment, in a manner wholly unavailable to the bourgeois character Luis. Demetrio's disinterest, however, creates a new contradiction: If on the one side Demetrio's defense of a small plot of land is heroic, in the wider context of the revolution it is also a narrow demand that dooms his actions to failure.

Demetrio's defeat is not sealed from the beginning, however, but is revealed through the rather unpredictable interactions between the novel's two main characters, Demetrio and Luis. As an expression of the socially heterogeneous makeup of Pancho Villa's army, these two characters of radically different social backgrounds come together by sheer accident. Luis deserts the federal army and is captured by Demetrio's band, and as Demetrio and Luis convalesce from their respective wounds they strike up a friendship that would have been unthinkable before the revolution (and indeed had been impossible to imagine in earlier novels).

Given the peculiar class structure of Mexican society, neither the bourgeois nor the peasant can emerge on his own as a hero in *Los de abajo*; they are, at least for a time, mutually dependent. This mutual dependency aligns with the Trotskyist historian Adolfo Gilly's observation that the Mexican bourgeoisie was weak and could not win a revolution on its own; instead, it needed to hitch its fortunes to the restive peasant masses. On the other hand, as Gilly also remarks, the aims of peasant insurgents were either clear but geographically limited, as in the case of Zapatismo, which fought for a concrete program of land redistribution while remaining circumscribed within the state of Morelos; or geographically expansive but politically unclear, as in the case of Villismo, whose forces extended across two-thirds of the Mexican territory at its high point but always lacked a coherent political program.[28] It is thus highly relevant that in *Los de abajo*, Luis's ambition momentarily helps to amplify the reach of Demetrio's actions as a leader. While Demetrio claims to be fighting only to be able to return in peace to his plot of land, Luis argues that the fight is not against any single cacique, but

> the *cacique* system itself, the system that is devastating the entire nation. We are constitutive pieces of a great social movement that will lead to the exaltation of our motherland. We are instruments of destiny for the revindication of the sacred rights of the people. (42)

As we have already seen, Luis's language of patriotic disinterest is somewhat of a ruse—the appeal to a united national struggle disguises his class interests from the outset. At the same time, however, Luis's words frame the revolution in terms of a totality as yet unavailable to Demetrio, *not* because he is unlettered, but because as a smallholding peasant he is mainly concerned with being able to return to his plot. It is only after Luis joins Demetrio's band that the group inserts itself into a wider struggle by traveling to Zacatecas for the decisive battle against Huerta's forces. While Demetrio himself had mentioned the possibility of traveling south, meaning that he might have reached the conclusion on his own, it is undeniable that Luis becomes a conduit for the transformation of his ragtag band into a component force within Villa's army. For example, when the men meet up with General Natera, Luis introduces Demetrio as a colonel, a fabrication that formally inserts the latter into Villa's army on the eve of the decisive Battle of Zacatecas. Demetrio, in turn, names Luis as his secretary, further intertwining their destinies over the course of the novel.

Part 1 of the novel thus marks Luis and Demetrio as representatives of two distinct but for the moment compatible objectives within the revolution: the defense of the smallholding for Demetrio, and the accumulation of money for Luis. Moreover, their coming together gives new impetus and direction to their objectives. Luis rides on the coattails of popular forces, and Demetrio's military prowess is amplified through his insertion into Villa's formidable military machine. Part 2 of the novel, however, reveals a new phase of struggle in which the nature of their alliance shifts. After the Battle of Zacatecas, Villa's forces seem unstoppable. As an expression of this expansive moment, Macías's band (previously formed mainly of men from around Moyahua) is joined by new members, most notably La Pintada, an audacious Northern woman, and El Güero Margarito, a psychopathic former waiter from Chihuahua. The entry of these two members into the band marks a turn away from heroic military feats toward less strategic acts of looting and revenge, as when Demetrio returns to Moyahua with the sole purpose of burning a political boss's house. Paradoxically, then, the growth of Villa's popular mobilization is accompanied by its increasing disarticulation in the novel. In similar

fashion, the high point of Luis and Demetrio's class alliance marks the beginning of its dissolution.

This incipient dissolution is most clearly articulated in a pair of scenes focused on looting. Discussions of looting in the novel frequently revolve around moral categories, to no small degree because Azuela himself clearly found the practice distasteful, as in his depiction of peasants burning Dante's *Inferno* to roast corn, preserving only the pages that have pictures. But a more nuanced reading of this practice becomes possible when we see how it allows the narrative to move forward, particularly in relation to the temporary alliance between Luis and Demetrio. In one scene, Luis discreetly presents Demetrio with a gold pocket watch he has found; afterward, when he thinks Demetrio is sleeping, Luis slips a box with two large diamonds into his own pocket, an action the newly minted colonel witnesses but doesn't stop, since he himself has no interest in such objects. While peasant characters loot objects oriented toward use (using books as kindling), the bourgeois carefully selects the portable objects most easily exchanged for money. Here, looting signals not so much the aimlessness of the peasant insurgents—who, after all, remain wholly faithful to a use economy—as the new, independent direction taken by their bourgeois allies, for whom looting becomes a mode of *accumulation*, as Adalbert Dessau has remarked.[29] Though we might reasonably fault Azuela for focusing on looting instead of the instances of land redistribution that also characterized Villismo, it has the distinct advantage of revealing how peasant actions might be appropriated and redeployed by bourgeois agents in the course of the armed struggle. Books burned to roast corn might inspire horror in the reader, but what such spectacles hide is the assertion of a more powerful logic of bourgeois accumulation emerging within the revolution itself.

This logic reaches its maximum expression in a later scene from part 2, after Demetrio has ascended to the rank of general in Villa's army. Luis, now Demetrio's secretary, presents his commander with bags of gold coins and jewels looted from houses. True to form, Luis begins by appealing to the sacred rights of the people they are fighting for, but quickly turns to suggest that, in the absence of clear revolutionary goals, the two men take the money and wait the rest of the war out abroad, Demetrio demurs. When Luis asks why, he can only answer that it "wouldn't be manly" (93). Again, Demetrio says he doesn't care for money and tells Luis to take it all. When

asked what he does want, the only thing Demetrio can think of is Camila, the peasant girl he met while convalescing in the town where he first met Luis. Camila, we already know, is in love with Luis, who in turn thinks of her in openly racist terms as a "homely female monkey" (28). Always ready to seize an opportunity, Luis returns to the town where Camila lives and tricks her into accompanying him to his camp, whereupon he hands her over to Demetrio. In return, we are to assume, Luis cements his claim over all the money and jewels Demetrio doesn't care about. Earlier in the narrative, such forceful exchanges of women were common: Luis himself—again in flagrant contradiction of his ideals—kidnapped an upper-class fourteen-year-old girl (later released by La Pintada). With Camila, though, the treatment of women as objects of exchange achieves a dramatic concentration as a specific means of masculine cross-class alliance, in the manner of what Eve Kofosky Sedgwick called a homosocial bond.[30] At first, the alliance seems successful: Camila, initially incensed by Luis's deception, comes to "like" Demetrio. But near the end of part 2, La Pintada—who vies for Demetrio's affection—kills Camila with a knife stowed in her stockings, signaling a definitive rupture within the band. This murder points toward an increasing rift between bourgeois and peasant factions within the revolution, even among the ranks of the dispossessed. For while La Pintada's speech and demeanor mark her as a member of the oppressed underclasses, her behavior aligns her more closely with Luis in terms of her radical and self-serving individualism, as when she states, for example, that people like her would take the place of the rich: "We're going to be the dandies (*catrines*) now" (77). Camila, in contrast, retains a solidarity with the poor, as revealed when she implores Demetrio to return the corn Luis had requisitioned from a peasant.

This class rupture becomes definitive two chapters later, albeit in a much less violent manner, when, at the end of part 2, Luis simply disappears from the novel's diegesis. We last see Luis on a train to Aguascalientes with the rest of the band. Once the band arrives, however, he is gone, never to be seen directly again. While not remarked upon by any of the characters, the timing of Luis's departure is quite significant, in the immediate aftermath of the Convention of Aguascalientes. As noted, the convention marked the end of the alliance between the popular armies of Villa and Zapata, on the one hand, and the "constitutionalist" forces led by the large landowner Venustiano Carranza and the petty bourgeois Álvaro Obregón, on the other.

As Adolfo Gilly reminds us, the weakness of the Mexican bourgeoisie forced this class into an alliance with popular struggle: the only way to achieve their aims, that is, was to accept the Jacobin methods of the masses.[31] Once the fight against Huerta was decided after the Battle of Zacatecas, however, the class interests of the bourgeoisie reasserted themselves, particularly with regard to land redistribution, to produce battling factions within the revolution. In the aftermath of this split, Zapata and Villa marched with their armies to occupy Mexico City in December 1915 (but did not take the government); Carranza, in turn, repaired to the port city of Veracruz, where he enlisted US arms and diplomatic support for what would become an all-out offensive against the popular armies.

If bourgeois and peasant interests were compatible in one moment, they came to openly contradict one another in the next. Luis and Demetrio's convergent and finally divergent paths powerfully express this contradiction, as an accident conditioned by historical forces. In the aftermath of the Aguascalientes Convention, Luis and Demetrio can no longer be allied. As if to highlight the now separate trajectories of the characters, the last scene of part 2 shows General Natera explaining the outcome of the convention to Demetrio, who agrees to continue to fight on Villa's side against Carranza, if only because Natera tells him to. Part 3, the final and shortest section of the novel, opens with Luis's voice, not as dialogue but by way of a letter addressed to a minor character, Venancio, and postmarked May 16, 1915, El Paso, Texas, the city where the novel was first published. This epistolary mechanism doubly displaces Luis: On a temporal plane, he no longer belongs to the novel's sphere of action; on a spatial one, he is no longer even in Mexico, but in the United States (not coincidentally, the imperial power that will provide arms to Carranza's supporters to defeat Villa's army). In the letter, Luis claims a lack of funds —which the reader by now should suspect is a patent lie—and urges Venancio to come to El Paso with money. With Luis's knowledge and connections in El Paso, he writes, the two might establish a Mexican restaurant that will make both of them rich "in a very short time" (120). Reading this letter in the present, Venancio sighs and says, "That *curro* really knew how to pull things off!" (120). This is indeed true: what Luis knew how to do better than anyone else was sense the shifting tides of revolutionary movement and play them to his own benefit, first by shifting

from Huerta's army to Villa's and then, when the tide turned against Villa, removing himself to the United States to wait out the rest of the conflict.

The individualism that has defined Luis from the beginning of the narrative comes into its fullest expression to synthesize the rise of a new class: a petty bourgeoisie that would acquire a key role in the post-revolutionary social order, especially under the guise of Obregonismo. As a result, bourgeois interests assert their dominance at the same time as peasant revolution is foreclosed as a mass project. At the same time, the triumphant bourgeois project is itself devoid of heroism. Here it is germane to recall the moment at the end of part 1 when Luis, in his pompous style, hails Pancho Villa as "our Mexican Napoleon!" (64). In some sense, the comparison is apt: It is true that the Mexican Revolution was a bourgeois revolution to the extent that it eliminated the Porfirian old regime. In another, though, Azuela calls attention to how the very need to make such comparisons with France underscores the weak, imitative, and supercilious character of the Mexican bourgeoisie, ever eager to extract itself from a peasant milieu. And while Azuela could not dispense with bourgeois idealism, his novel is unable to imagine the triumphant factions of the Mexican bourgeoisie in any sort of progressive role.

The peasant insurgency, for its part, cannot survive once it comes under attack by the bourgeois forces with which it had once been allied. In part 3, Demetrio continues fighting, even after he learns of Villa's definitive defeat in the Battle of Celaya from deserters. On a brief visit to his wife, he explains that he can't stay; when she asks why, he likens himself to a rock falling down the canyon. While we might criticize Azuela for insisting upon Demetrio's lack of understanding of why he fights as a lazy trope of peasant ignorance, the novel is quite perceptive insofar as it expresses Villismo's lack of a national vision able to transcend bourgeois constitutionalism. Demetrio, we'll remember, was fighting for his small plot of land; it was Luis who articulated the peasant fight in larger terms, as poised against an entire system of caciques; it was also Luis who helped, concretely, to place Demetrio's band within the burgeoning ranks of Villismo. The problem, however, was not only that the peasant-bourgeois alliance could not last, but that peasant demands—absent a clear national program—became trapped within a bourgeois framework. For Gilly, drawing from Lenin, peasant power mediated by bourgeois actors inevitably became "a bourgeois power suspended in the air."[32] The peasantry couldn't ally with a proletariat (as it

would in Russia) because its numbers were scant; a peasant alliance with the bourgeoisie, however, inevitably revealed an antagonism that could not be resolved. The power "suspended in the air" came crashing down, much like the rock Demetrio throws into the canyon. On some level, despite his claims to the contrary, Demetrio achieves an understanding of the conflict that is in fact quite profound: just as rocks are subject to the laws of physics, so too are human agents propelled and constrained by social forces beyond their control. And while, unlike physics, these social forces are not governed by natural laws, they are objective insofar as their antagonisms exert real limits on his action.

A moment of further insight comes immediately before Demetrio's dwindling forces are defeated by the ascendant Carrancistas. Thinking again about why he continues to fight, he recalls a visit he made to Tepatitlán with Camila earlier in the novel, where they met an old peon who continued to work for his master, even in the midst of revolution. Now, nearing the end of the Villista insurgency, Demetrio muses:

> But I figure that what's happening to us is the same thing as happened to that peasant in Tepatitlán. Remember? He never stopped complainin' about his boss, but he never stopped workin' neither. And that's just how we are: we complain and complain, and then we kill and kill. (128)

Demetrio stops himself from going any further: He should be rallying his men, not making them think about such things. On the one hand, the novel's comparison between the old peon and insurgents can be interpreted, as in Adalbert Dessau's reading, as a relapse into naturalistic fatalism. Peasants remain just as unfree as they were before the revolution—the fight has all been for naught.[33] On the other hand, though, against the backdrop of the novel's previous dedication to the overturning of previous social relations by peasants, the sudden resurgence of the old announces, in an appropriately heavy-handed way, a principle of restoration at the heart of bourgeois factionalism. For what was the Carranza–Obregon alliance if not an attempt to contain and extinguish the insurrectionary energies that paved their rise to power? Of course, we should not take Demetrio's statement about the persistence of peasant unfreedom literally. The vast scale of peasant insurgency made it impossible for the victorious bourgeois faction not to recognize their demands by formally enshrining land redistribution in the Constitution of 1917. And yet, in insisting upon the sanctity of private

property as the cornerstone of the post-revolutionary state, this freedom would be more formal than substantive, because it was circumscribed within a bourgeois regime of accumulation. As I'll examine in the next chapter through the fiction of Juan Rulfo, sweeping land reform protected a smallholding peasantry while at the same time subjecting it to the depredations of an ever-expanding market system. Azuela, writing during the armed phase of the revolution, could not have seen these precise developments. But *Los de abajo* is able to uncover a principle of riotous upheaval followed by its containment by bourgeois and, by association, imperial forces. This reassertion is perhaps most strongly expressed in the moment when Demetrio and his remaining soldiers are mowed down "like ears of corn" by the machine guns wielded by Carranza's soldiers, an agrarian metaphor that highlights the asymmetrical character of the battle in its new phase. In this manner, as Bruno Bosteels has suggested more broadly, the novel of the Mexican Revolution reveals its true nature as the novel of counterrevolution.[34]

But seeing *Los de abajo* as a novel of counterrevolution might affirm too quickly a conservative quality baked into such novels. *Los de abajo* points in a different direction, toward not so much the limitations of the novel as a form, but those of the Mexican Revolution itself. To be sure, *Los de abajo* ends up in a position of regression; at the same time, it remains open to history in potent ways. This double-sided proposition is present in the novel's last lines: "At the foot of a craggy hollow—enormous and magnificent as the portico of an old cathedral—Demetrio Macías, his eyes fixed forever, continues to aim with the barrel of his rifle" (134). While Azuela had revised much of the novel from the present to the past tense, he retains the present tense in this last scene, contemporizing what he had so carefully historicized. This gives the ending a static quality, in the manner of a hero's monument (or, as in the imagery offered by Azuela, an old cathedral). At the same time, the ellipses that end the novel suggest that the story it tells, even as it ends on a note of defeat, is not over. The stem of chaotic events has been decided for now, but not forever.

In keeping with this future-oriented gesture, the narrative of regression implied by the defeat of peasant forces coexists with the novel's ability to capture, whether wittingly or unwittingly, more ambiguous forms of freedom resulting from revolutionary struggle. At the edges of the scenes set in Aguascalientes, the novel's true turning point, we begin to see the

emergence of a new segment of the population: people who have been liberated from the estate system but who, in short order, have come to depend on a market system with nothing to sell but their labor, a situation Marx bitingly referred to as freedom in the double sense. Presciently, this phenomenon finds its referent in two figures that would come to personify peasant double freedom in twentieth-century Mexico: a beggar woman and an informal street vendor. On the train to Aguascalientes, a woman, child in arms, automatically and monotonously repeats a story: “Gentlemen, a well-dressed gentleman stole my suitcase in Silao … I had my life savings in there. I don’t even have ’nough left to feed my child” (113). The passage invokes the distinct treachery of the bourgeoisie (by way of the “well-dressed” man who robs her of her money), but also the more spectral market relations upon which the woman has come to depend. Just pages later, the repetitive strains of the beggar woman are replaced with those of a street vendor, a man who weaves in and out of the crowd hawking folk remedies and prayers: “Fifty cents per prayer to Our Lord upon the Cross, fifty cents …” (116). Neither peons nor smallholding peasants, these figures have nothing to sell but their labor. What Azuela’s novel seems to suggest, though, is that bourgeois victory would result not in Madero’s fantasy of an independent yeomanry (an outcome itself precluded by bourgeois interests), but in market dependency and, as a result, frequently in immiseration.

Bourgeois victory also seems to preclude the continued exercise of the epic movement uncovered in *Los de abajo*. For the most part, after writing this novel, Azuela retreated back into the milieu he knew best. His next two novels, *Los caciques* (*The Bosses*, 1917) and *Las moscas* (*The Flies*, 1918), continued to train an unsparing gaze on the thievery and trickery of the petty bourgeoisie. What makes such novels different from *Los de abajo*, as Brushwood has noted, is the complete absence of the peasantry from their purview.[35] Epic possibility, in turn, disappears with the disappearance of historical agency from below. It would be left to subsequent generations of Mexican novelists to (re)discover its elusive movements, though most often through narrative forms other than epic realism. I will examine some of these forms in the next chapter; for now, though, I turn to a context where an as-yet unrealized socialist revolution renewed the epic potential of the novel.

The Realist Ayllu

The sudden irruption of the Mexican Revolution allowed Azuela to discover a realist mode able to depict the rise and fall of peasant insurgency during the world's first agrarian revolution. No sooner had this vision articulated itself, however, than it relapsed into the ahistorical pessimism that had guided his earlier works. This relapse reveals, perhaps, an unresolved contradiction within Azuela's own bourgeois worldview. On the one hand, Azuela clearly despised the opportunism and parasitism of the Mexican bourgeoisie; on the other, however, he could not trust a peasantry he saw as at turns noble, insofar as it inscribed itself within bourgeois norms of property, and barbaric insofar as it exceeded those norms. Faced with a rising bourgeoisie that was not noble, and a peasantry that was not bourgeois, Azuela's fiction could perhaps not avoid a fatalistic turn.

Quite a different picture emerges, however, when we turn to the Peruvian novelist, ethnologist, and public intellectual José María Arguedas (1911–69), whose vision was not individual and bourgeois but collective and socialist, a shift that carried with it important consequences for his realist practice. Born the son of an itinerant lawyer in a remote highland region of Andahuaylas in Peru, Arguedas spent his early childhood on his stepmother's estate in neighboring Ayacucho, where, by his own account, he was raised by Quechua-speaking indigenous servants. The author's deep love of the Quechua language and customs might easily have acquired a solely liberal and romantic character, as in the nineteenth-century pro-indigenous current known as indigenismo: Clorinda Matto de Turner's classic *Aves sin nido* (*Torn from the Nest*, 1889), which offers British investment and moral uplift as solutions to the abuse of indigenous people by landowners and the church, is emblematic in this regard. Marxism, however, opened a starkly different path for Arguedas and countless other members of his generation.

Especially important in this regard was Arguedas's exposure to the thought of José Carlos Mariátegui, a foundational figure in Peruvian and indeed Latin American Marxism, who in 1928 declared that "the moment for attempting the liberal, individualist" solution to the agrarian problem in Peru "has already passed."[36] Because of Peru's fundamental colonial structure, there was no progressive bourgeoisie to lead a revolution against the "feudal" latifundio; nor, by extension, was there a proletariat. Even so,

Mariátegui maintained that it was *not* too early for socialism in Peru. As a kind of silver lining of the persistence of the latifundio system after independence, the indigenous agrarian commune, or *ayllu*, had survived, thereby preserving "elements of practical socialism in indigenous agriculture and life."[37] In a view that chimes with Marx's late thinking on the Russian *mir*, Mariátegui held that the ayllu was not destined by any historical law to disappear; instead, it might constitute the basis for a socialist future in Peru.[38] This was especially important in a context like Peru, where (as in Mexico at the time of its revolution) the ranks of the proletariat were thin. For Mariátegui, the absence of a proletariat did *not* mean, however, that revolution would have to wait: It might be located within the indigenous agrarian commune itself.

I will have more to say below about how Mariátegui's ideas became formalized in Arguedas's fiction. For the moment, however, I want to stress the degree to which a heterodox Marxism offered Arguedas a philosophy of history rooted in the possibility of revolutionary change, one that in turn opened a new path for the novel. Along these lines, Arguedas insisted that without the Marxist ideas that flowered in Peru in the aftermath of World War I, he would be "nothing"; in particular, the journal edited by Mariátegui in the 1920s, *Amauta*, offered

> the theoretical possibility that one day, through the activities of human beings, social injustice could disappear from the world, and that what has made it possible for us to write and what gave us the indispensable theoretical instrument to judge these experiences and transform them into good material for literature.[39]

If Azuela's perspective, even at its most expansive, remained individual and bourgeois, Arguedas developed a literary perspective infused with both indigenous (that is, collective) and socialist energies. To recall Mariátegui's statement that it was too late for a liberal solution to the agrarian question in Peru, the time had also passed for bourgeois realism. Only a socialist viewpoint might reinvent the historical novel in Latin America.

Such an interpretation, I want to establish at the outset, might sound bizarre or simply wrong-headed to contemporary readers of Arguedas. Over the past three decades, in the wake of poststructuralism and its sequelae, categories of Marxist critique such as totality, structure, necessity, and even history have given way to particularistic idioms of indigenous culture, language, and identity with respect to this author's works. In a related vein,

the term *realism* is rarely used these days as an entry point into his novels, never having fully recovered from its Cold War baggage as a mimetic and/or naïve form of representation. In the 1960s, for example, the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar infamously painted Arguedas as provincial realist preoccupied with the "five notes of an Andean flute," in contrast with the "supranational" elements of his own writing.[40] While the racist undertones of such a position are widely recognized today, there have been few parallel attempts to vindicate the specifically realist qualities of Arguedas's oeuvre. To be sure, Arguedas's own relationship with both Marxist thought and realism were contradictory and sui generis. The author never spent much time in organized party structures and frequently found himself at loggerheads with more orthodox Marxist positions on indigenous struggle. At a 1965 roundtable convened to discuss one of Arguedas's novels, for example, Marxist sociologists in attendance roundly criticized the author for seeing "Indians" where there were only "peasants," and for embracing forms of "magic" that should be overcome by scientific reason.[41] Moreover, Arguedas's literary production, like that of other Latin American writers, always exceeded standard definitions of realism, because the social conditions to which it responded always diverged from the ones that gave birth to them in Western European contexts. And yet, as Arguedas himself insisted quite late into his life, his writing would have been "nothing" without Marxism. Similarly, I would add, his literary project would have been nothing without a parallel commitment to epic realist form, where the particularity of Andean indigenous cultures emerged in dialectical tension with notions of totality and universality.

Arguedas's commitment to epic realist form was expressed in turn by way of the ambitious scope of his fiction. As Antonio Cornejo Polar observed in an early study, Arguedas's literary oeuvre was accretive and expansive in scope, moving from the "smallest cell" of the Andean community in his short stories from the 1930s, to the province in *Yawar Fiesta*, to a department in *Los ríos profundos* (*Deep Rivers*, 1958), to all of Peru in *Todas las sangres* (All the bloodlines, 1964).[42] Arguedas himself referred to these works as composing a discrete cycle dedicated to Andean social life.[43] In hindsight, the aim of that cycle was, in the words of the Peruvian historian Alberto Flores Galindo, to trace the "the itinerary of the

expansion of the domestic market … following the incorporation of people into the market."[44]

Viewed from this angle, the stakes of Arguedas's fiction far exceed the bounds of Andean indigenous culture. This is by no means to minimize or belittle this component of his oeuvre, but rather to place it on grounds whence its true complexity—eminently historical in character—emerges through the author's self-conscious use of realist form. While a thorough investigation of what we might call Arguedas's cycle of indigenous freedom is beyond the scope of this chapter, we can appreciate the emergence and consolidation of the project in two specific moments examined below: first, Arguedas's engagement with the so-called proletarian novel in the 1930s, which in the Andes took the form of a militant indigenismo; and second, the maturation of this project into a new kind of historical novel in the 1940s, with the publication of *Yawar Fiesta*, a text I consider an underrecognized gem of world realism.

Arguedas's fiction first emerged as a variant of 1930s proletarian literature, a term that naturally acquired a different valence in Latin America, where the majority of the population were not proletarians living in cities, but peasants, members of indigenous agrarian communities, or agricultural laborers on plantations. Rather than taking as their point of departure the industrial city, then, the majority of these works addressed different forms of oppression and exploitation in the countryside. One dominant variant examined the highly capitalized imperial commodity enclave; often, such novels bore the title of the commodity that drove social existence, as in Fernando Vallejo's *Tungsteno* (1931) or Jorge Amado's *Cacau* (1933).[45] A second variant of this literature addressed the abuse of indigenous communities by large landowners, as was the case of most Andean indigenista novels: Jorge Icaza's *Huasipungo* (1934) is a case in point, as are the short stories in Arguedas's collection *Agua* (1935). Today, this corpus is often dismissed as didactic and aesthetically naïve. This is too harsh a judgment, however; as we'll see below via Arguedas, socialist internationalism allowed authors to understand even the most traditional-seeming regions as part of a larger, indeed global, system, and therefore subject to a principle of change. This enlivened sense of totality and movement in turn formed the basis of a literary practice that would infuse the Latin American novel long after the moment of 1930s internationalism had passed.

In their socialist realist incarnation, Arguedas's early literary works gravitated toward open and fatal conflict, a possibility that was itself opened by the nearly fifty indigenous uprisings that occurred across the Peruvian highlands in the early 1920s.[46] While these uprisings did not coalesce into an instance as explosive as the Mexican Revolution, they did charge the atmosphere with a sense of possibility. The victory of the Russian Revolution inspired 1930s authors to imagine the transformation of the entire world. As a brief example of the sense of historical possibility that infused Arguedas's early fiction, we can turn to his first short story, "Agua" (1935). Narrated by a nonindigenous, or *misti*, boy named Ernesto (an alter ego for Arguedas), the story recounts how a landowner steals water from an ayllu, enabling his own crops to grow while those of the community wither and die. The leader of the community, Pantaleón, has recently returned from a stint working on a plantation on the coast, defies the landowner. The landowner, ill accustomed to challenges to his absolute authority, kills Pantaleón with impunity. The story culminates with Ernesto seeking refuge in a neighboring indigenous community, wishing death to landowners (*principales*) "everywhere" (*en todas partes*).[47]

In an important sense, the story proceeds as a fictional examination of the Peruvian agrarian problem as outlined by Mariátegui, one of whose key elements was to identify a dual but interlocking structure constituted by capitalist agriculture on the coast and unproductive, "feudal" haciendas in the highlands. These unproductive haciendas, while highly oppressive, had been unable to dislodge the communal structure of the ayllus. The question taken up by Arguedas's fiction is how and under which conditions this commune might be mobilized in the service of a utopian project. Arguedas's 1930s fiction thus began to examine the ayllu as a site of both continuity and unpredictable change. As an important detail in the story, an older member of the community, Don Vilkas, does not dare to question the landowner's power; Pantaleón, by contrast, perhaps radicalized by his work on the coastal plantation, emerges as the leader of a failed rebellion. The ayllu, however isolated, is identified as part of a wider terrain of historical struggle against oppression, not just in the highlands but "everywhere."

"Agua" already contains the germ of an epic style of representation, Peter Elmore notes, in its "depiction of violent, angry clashes between irreconcilable groups divided by class and ethnicity." It was this quality, Elmore surmises, that led Arguedas, in a slip of the pen, to refer to "Agua"

and other early short stories as "novels."[48] At the same time, we can also note that this incipient epic quality ran up against the formal limits of proletarian literature (and for that matter, 1930s indigenismo), which subordinated narrative development to the production of consciousness in the reader. "Agua," Arguedas once noted, was written in a moment in which it seemed that "social justice was around the corner"; the question was not if, but when this would happen.[49] By the 1940s, however, it had become clear that worldwide revolution was not around the corner, and his fiction was forced to take a different path. As a well-known story goes, Arguedas's subsequent literary works matured along lines of language and culture, as he found ways of rendering Quechua syntax into Spanish and indigenous worldviews into the novel form. This is undoubtedly true, but I want to point to an equally crucial element of the breakthrough, one that built upon the trajectory begun with socialist internationalism: a deeper and more complex engagement with history itself. For, once a revolution that seemed "around the corner" failed to materialize, it became necessary to try to understand how society was changing under *capitalism* in Peru, and which social forces might surface to overcome it. It was thus that, together with other authors, most notably the Brazilian writer Jorge Amado, Arguedas transformed socialist realist practice into a much more ambitious engagement with a form akin to the historical novel or, as I am naming it in the context of twentieth-century Latin America, modern agrarian epic.[50]

Arguedas himself thought in terms that are quite resonant with Lukács's own analytics of the historical novel, though it is almost certain the two never read each other's work. For Lukács, writing in the late 1930s, this form was able to "evoke the totality of the process of social development" under capitalism, thereby giving the impression of "an entire society in movement."[51] In a 1950 text on the Peruvian novel, Arguedas uses a similar language to note that the novel aims to evoke the country in "all of its elements, in its disturbing and confused human reality."[52] The novel's charge is then to identify how this society moves*:*

> To show how people are constantly being disconcerted by the ebb and flow of their day-to-day destiny. Such a tide, under a definition of limits that is only apparent beneath the surface, forces them to make a constant effort to accommodate, to readjust to a permanent drama.[53]

The common thread linking these approaches was most certainly a shared Marxist understanding of history mediated by the victory of the Russian Revolution and an appreciation for realist modes as a means of evoking it. Of course, it is entirely possible that Lukács would have disapproved of Arguedas's fiction. And yet his critical apparatus is quite useful for understanding how and why the historical novel might flourish in peripheral societies like Peru long after its decline in nineteenth-century Europe. According to Lukács, this form ran out of steam in France and England after the bourgeois counterrevolutions of 1848; it remained alive in Russia, however, with authors such as Leo Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky, where uneven development, and not bourgeois reification, remained the order of the day. Precisely because the so-called peasant problem continued to dominate Russian society, it was possible for novelists to evoke whole phases of uneven capitalist development in a manner completely unavailable to their Western European contemporaries: The decline of serfdom, for example, allowed Tolstoy to depict "with extraordinary clarity the changes wrought in the various strata of society by this transformation of old Russia … in all their mobility." Gorky was able, in a later moment, to evoke Russian society as "a seething witches' cauldron in which history is brewing the new *classes* of capitalist society out of the old rotten, feudal, and semi-feudal estates."[54] It follows, then, that the epic possibilities embedded in the historical novel might capture, with equal sharpness, the contradictions of uneven developments in other contexts. Such is the case, certainly, of José María Arguedas's epic evocations of the uneven yet cataclysmic development of capitalism in twentieth-century Peru.

And nowhere is this epic impulse stronger than in Arguedas's first novel, *Yawar Fiesta*. Its epic character doesn't appear, however, at first glance: Like *Los de abajo*, *Yawar Fiesta* is relatively short. Beyond this, the novel presents itself as a small-scale study of a single highland town, Puquio (where Arguedas spent some of his childhood), over the course of a single week. Set sometime in the 1930s, the novel's main conceit is simple: A subprefect who has recently arrived in Puquio from the coast tries to prohibit the town's annual bullfight, the eponymous *yawar fiesta*. This bullfight, whose name unites the Quechua word for "blood" and the Spanish word for "festival," involves men from the neighboring indigenous communities fighting with a bull, eventually blowing it up with a stick of dynamite every year on Peruvian Independence Day. The subprefect, who

fancies himself a “civilized” man, is scandalized by the custom and tries to prohibit it. The rest of the novel focuses on the contradictory and unpredictable alliances the prohibition calls forth as, on the one hand, old-style landowners and indigenous communities align to preserve the bullfight and, on the other, new landowners and indigenous migrants to the capital city of Lima align to enforce the prohibition.

Whereas the short story “Agua” centered on a direct (though doomed) attack on landowner power, *Yawar Fiesta* unfolds as a small skirmish over a cultural practice. This small skirmish is, however, always framed as a part of a much larger battle, an element that lends the novel a much more pronounced epic quality than has his earlier short story. Along these lines, the novel doesn’t begin immediately with the story of the coastal government official and the highland bullfight, but with two chapters dedicated to outlining a much longer history of indigenous expropriation and, crucially, incipient commodity relations in the highlands. In the first chapter, “Indian Town” (*pueblo indio*), an omniscient narrator recounts how, in the aftermath of the exhaustion of nearby silver mines in the seventeenth century, Spaniards dispossessed the ayllus of Puquio to establish hacienda agriculture, pushing them higher and higher into the mountains.

> And the plundering of the ayllus began. With the authorities’ backing, the mistis began with the K’ollana neighborhood. K’ollana had good corn, barley, and wheat fields. The judges and the notaries signed papers of every description; that sufficed. After K’ollana came K’ayau. The lands with the most water were in those districts, and they were closest to won. Next came Chaupi and Pichk’achuri.[55]

The narration proceeds as a compressed sequence with life-altering consequences for the communities, as expropriation forces community members to disperse into the town as mestizos or *chalos*, names used in the novel to refer to acculturated indigenous people. On the whole, however, the communities survived the onslaught, holding on to customs, language, and (as in the story “Agua”), ritual control over water distribution. In spite of colonial occupation, Puquio remained, as a disembodied voice interjects throughout the chapter, an “Indian town!” (1).

The historical movement outlined in the first chapter becomes even more intense in the second, titled “The Dispossession.” In a moment closer to the present, demand for cattle from Lima—a place so far from daily experience

it is continually referred to as a foreign land by characters in the novel—unleashed a further wave of dispossession of the four ayllus. The mountaintops previously left alone were seized by landowners as grazing land:

> All of a sudden, there was a great demand for cattle on the coast, especially in Lima; then the *mistis* began to take over the Indians' wheat fields to plant alfalfa in them. But that was not enough; from the coast came more and more calls for cattle. The *mistis* who took beef cattle to the coast came back loaded with money. And the important people were almost frantic; they ran the Indians off to grab their land, and once again they made the judges, notaries and court clerks sweat … (11)

Note again the compressed, linear principle of narration that draws a clear contrast between one moment and the next. The effect is to evoke a historical transition with clear demarcations: At the end of the process, the landowners "began to make a clean sweep, once and for all, of the stone huts, of the hamlets; they began to put up stone walls and fence off the free puna with thorn bushes and stone" (12). Many of the dispossessed were forced into the town, "carrying their pots, their pelts and their children" (15).

Similar depictions of primitive accumulation appear at earlier points in this book: Rómulo Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara* narrated the founding of an estate through an act of genocide; and Rosario Castellanos's *Balún Canán* narrated the dispossession of indigenous inhabitants by landowners. What is different in Arguedas's *Yawar Fiesta*, though, is the extent to which the narrative voice adopts and maintains a collective indigenous perspective from its opening pages onward. While particular to itself in cultural and linguistic terms, this viewpoint emerges as the only one able to provide a window onto Puquio as a totality. This is because the indigenous perspective is uniquely able to register a history that has been erased from the legal documents the mistis cherish, but on an even deeper level, it is because the *ayllu*'s collective vision allows it to see things their oppressors can't. This perspective, transformed into narrative omniscience, notes: "From the mountain peaks four streams descend and flow near the town; in the cascades the white water is calling, but the *mistis* do not hear it. On the hillsides, on the plains, on the mountaintops the yellow flowers dance in the wind, but the *mistis* hardly see them" (9). Here the narrator gestures at a Quechua indigenous worldview that posits a fundamental unity between all living things, a unity that stretches from humans to animals and nature. The

mistis, by contrast, operate according to a logic of separation that ejects communities from land and transforms animals into commodities. Oblivious to their surroundings, they are only able to get drunk, "sneeze," and "calculat[e] the weight of their steers" (9).

It is only after establishing this history of enclosure and expansion of commodity relations that the novel reopens in the third chapter to narrate how events unfold in the diegetic present, surrounding the town's annual bullfight. A sweeping story of dispossession sets up a small one; or, alternately, a story about concrete material transformations sets up a story about a struggle over a cultural practice that unfolds over the course of a single week leading up to the town bullfight. As already noted, Arguedas is read today mainly from a culturalist standpoint, and the novel's turn to the bullfight after this chapter might be viewed as a turn to what the author is really interested in: the communities' attempts to preserve their traditions. But such an interpretation is only possible if we disaggregate the material transformations outlined in the first chapters from the unfolding of culture in the present. For by insisting upon the long history of indigenous dispossession and enclosure, first through colonialism and then through the emergence of a domestic market, Arguedas not only establishes a backdrop for the novel's plot, but also a set of structuring determinations that simultaneously free and constrain its characters in the bounds of the realist novel. Along these lines, it is surely not accidental that the recent commodification of cattle opens onto a story about bullfighting. The epic story of an entire people, resisting dispossession for centuries, opens onto a vision where society is moving in the present.

And so, after two chapters that narrate a long process of change in Puquio, the novel "begins again," as Horacio Legrás puts it, in the third chapter to zero in on events unfolding in the present.[56] The temporal transition is abrupt, and as such deserves attention. In contrast with the broad temporal markers employed in the first two chapters, the third chapter begins in the here and now:

> On the puna and on the mountains surrounding the town they were now sounding the *wakawak'ras* [trumpets]. When they heard the *turupukllay* [bullfight song] on the country roads and in the wheat fields, Indians and townspeople spoke of that year's bullfight. (19)

In classic realist fashion, a single element—the sound of the trumpet—unites separate settings in a single moment: Members of one ayllu discuss

plans to capture a bull; landowners and townspeople complain about the noise; and the vicar, saying mass, proclaims it "Devil's music!" (22). The fact that a wakawak'ra becomes the literal instrument of the novel's "meanwhile" establishes that indigenous culture extends to all spheres of social life in Puquio, even as these spheres are segmented along lines of race and class. While in a European context we might expect a clock or a calendar to fulfill this function, in *Yawar Fiesta*, an element of indigenous culture functions as a site of mediated objectivity within the realist apparatus.

This mediated objectivity extends into the novel's examination of the different responses to the subprefect's edict. Importantly, this examination does not limit itself to indigenous communities but instead tries to understand the movement of Puquian society as a whole. This emphasis aligns with Arguedas's own insistence that his novels were not "indigenist" to the extent that they did not limit themselves to indigenous people but tried to understand Peru "in all of its elements."[57] In a manner that resonates with Lukács' notion of historically typical individuals, Arguedas noted in his 1950 essay on the Peruvian novel that "myriad" characters were emerging under conditions of intense tumult, whose "different souls can only be defined through the novel."[58] At the same time, however, these characters were unique in that they were not always individuals; the Peruvian novel, in this sense, has been mainly "a narration of the adventures of towns rather than of individuals."[59] In keeping with this observation, *Yawar Fiesta* is less concerned with individual characters than with interactions between larger groups of people. It is thus that the novel traces how a set of alliances and misalliances emerges between two main groups: one that supports the prohibition of the bullfight, and another that wants to keep it going.

The prohibition of the bullfight, on the one hand, sparks an unlikely alliance between the coastal subprefect, a subset of landowners, and a group of former ayllu members who have migrated to Lima. This alliance emerges when, at a gathering at the subprefect's home, a group of landowners excitedly tell him about the upcoming bullfight. Every bit the pompous provincial official, the subprefect is horrified at what he interprets as the barbarity of the practice. In larger terms, the subprefect expresses the rather new presence of the centralized and modernizing Peruvian state in the highlands under the administration of Augusto Leguía. In addition to

courting foreign investment and introducing infrastructure projects to integrate the national economy, the Leguía government attempted to put a check on the overweening power of highland landowners. In the novel, the landowners socializing with the subprefect don't want their power checked, but they don't want to be seen as barbaric, either. And so, in an attempt to ingratiate themselves with the state official, they begin to disavow the bullfight they had just vaunted as the essence of their town. One landowner, for example, despite his own enjoyment of the festival for decades, announces: "The Puquio bullfight is a disgrace to our town. It makes us look like African savages" (37). Here we have something like the ideological comedy Roberto Schwarz describes in his classic essay "Misplaced Ideas," in which peripheral elites are called upon to ventriloquize "civilized" ideals that are openly contradicted by their own reliance upon the most brutal means of domination.[60] In twentieth-century Peru, the commercial "progress" that has begun in the highlands, bringing in the state on its heels, depends upon the plunder of communal lands and relations of servitude on haciendas. In a word, it is an order that is anything but civilized.

In addition to these landowners, another social group in Puquio opposed the bullfight, though on more serious grounds. This group is composed of members of Puquio's indigenous communities who have since migrated to the capital to work as domestic servants and laborers, and are referred to as chalos, a term for acculturated indigenous people. At their social club in Lima, the chalos receive the subprefect's telegram inviting them to hire a Spanish bullfighter for the bullfight on July 28. They accept not because they admire the subprefect but because they see the yawar fiesta as a brutal practice in which their brothers die for the entertainment of the landowners. As the student Escobar, an open admirer of José Carlos Mariátegui, vows: "Never again shall the Indians die in the Pichk'achuri square to give those pigs pleasure!" (72).

On the other side, the novel posits an equally contradictory alliance that sets out to preserve the festival: old-style landowners or *gamonales*, represented by the largest landowner in the region, Don Julián; town mestizos like the storekeeper Don Pancho; and the ayllus themselves, which, tellingly, are not composed of single characters but evoked as a collective entity (more on this in a moment). In the context of the long and bitter history of conflict between the landowners and the communities

outlined in the first two chapters of the novel, the alliance between Don Julián and the indigenous communities is, to put it mildly, highly contradictory. This alliance emerges when the landowner authorizes the K'ayau community to capture a wild bull, nicknamed Misitu, from the forest of his estate for use in the fight. Don Julián allows the community to capture the bull because he has no use for the bourgeois mores of the subprefect, but also because he doesn't want the state to meddle in his affairs. For male members of the indigenous communities, on the other hand, the yawar fiesta is not a sign of subservience to the landowners, but rather one of strength vis-à-vis the misti (nonindigenous) usurpers, Don Julián included. To this end, the narrator recalls how at the previous year's bullfight, Honrao, his clothes tattered and blood oozing from his ribs, shouted in Quechua: "I Pichk'achuri runakuna, k'alakuna!" (I'm a pinchk'a churi person, you outsiders!) (20).

In the end, the second group, composed of Don Julián and the ayllus, wins the skirmish over the bullfight. The Spanish bullfighter brought from Lima, already rattled by the songs sung by the women of the ayllus, is scared senseless by the giant bull Misitu and quickly runs from the ring in fright. At that moment, the town's mayor—previously aligned with the subprefect—suddenly switches sides and authorizes the indigenous bullfighters to enter the ring. As one man is gored, blood gushing from his groin, another sticks dynamite in the bull's face. The novel ends as the mayor, clearly delighted by the spectacle, yells into the ear of the stunned subprefect: "You see, Señor Subprefect? This is how our bullfights are. The real *yawar punchay!*" (147).

At first glance, nothing has changed, and the old order has prevailed. In contrast with earlier indigenista narratives, such as the aforementioned story "Agua," the novel does not end with a direct assault on landowner power, but rather with the preservation of a festival embraced by landowners and indigenous communities alike. Much to the dismay of the chalos, the indigenous communities act against the modernizing state but not the landowning class. Landowners, in turn, fall back into their default positions once the Spanish bullfighter abandons the ring, relinquishing the values of "civilization" as quickly as they had adopted them. The modernizing state, on a basic level, has failed, recalling Mariátegui's dictum that the time for a liberal solution to the country's agrarian problem had passed: There will be no bourgeois revolution in the highlands, only state pageantry and empty

paeans to civilization. But if it was too late for a liberal solution, the novel also seems to reveal ambiguous prospects for socialist revolution as well. The two groups that might ally to this end—the ayllus and the Marxist chalos—have made initial contact, but have not achieved mutual comprehension, much less organization.

In light of this impasse, we might concur with Cornejo Polar's argument that *Yawar Fiesta* is ultimately about the recomposition of the traditional Andean world.[61] But if this is to some degree true, the novel's realist apparatus also reveals that the recomposition of tradition under unstable and changing circumstances produces something entirely new. Beneath the surface of preservation, that is, the novel identifies a far-reaching transformation. And, perhaps surprisingly, the entity that reveals itself most vulnerable to change is the ayllu itself. As argued above, the novel's epic character stems in part from its adoption of an indigenous point of view rooted in the ayllu as a millenarian collectivity. This collectivity exerts an influence on the novel's system of characters as well. As Arguedas himself noted, "There are scarcely any Indian names in *Yawar Fiesta*."[62] This is because members of the ayllu cannot be figured as individuals in a bourgeois sense. While individuals, always male, occasionally emerge to speak or act for a brief moment (such as Honrao getting gored by the bull), they do not develop as characters, but instead quickly recede back into the collective. We are much more likely to see an entire group of people traversing a plain, singing songs, or tending to crops.

In a real sense, such collective forms of representation would be unthinkable in the European heartlands of realism: Lukács writes, for example, that the emergence of the historical novel in nineteenth-century England and France assumed "the separation of means of conditions of production and labour-power," and with it the creation of the bourgeois individual.[63] This process of individuation was also to some degree assumed by Azuela, whose own version of the historical novel could only imagine as its hero a peasant who had already become a small property holder. *Yawar Fiesta*, by contrast, presumes the cohesion rather than dissolution of communal forms of existence and finds narrative means to evoke them.

At the same time, however, what is remarkable about Arguedas's novel is that he approaches the ayllu as an entity that is always subject to change. Specifically, the novel studies, as if under a microscope, how the very

attempt to preserve the communal bases of indigenous life might also accelerate their dissolution. Marx's observation about precapitalist communal structures in the *Grundrisse* is useful in this regard:

> In all these forms, the *reproduction of presupposed relations*—more or less naturally arisen or historical as well, but become traditional—of the individual to his commune, together with a *specific, objective existence, predetermined* for the individual, of his relations both to the conditions of labour and to his co-herders, fellow tribesmen etc.—are the foundation of development, which is therefore from the outset *restricted*, but which signifies decay, decline and fall once this barrier is suspended.[64]

The ayllus of *Yawar Fiesta*, of course, cannot be called precapitalist in the same sense as the ancient Romans or Incas; instead, they had coexisted with and been transformed by centuries of colonialism and, in more recent decades, imperialism and capitalism. This long history, rather than invalidating Marx's observation, though, suggests a further possibility: that the barriers protecting the commune might be breached by the processes of enclosure and incipient commodification narrated in the first chapters of the novel. The ayllu might very well persist, but, depending on circumstances, it might also disappear.

Two concrete instances in *Yawar Fiesta* provide insights into where the ayllu might be headed: first, a flashback that recalls the construction of a highway from Puquio to the coast; and second, the capturing of the wild bull Misitu for use in the bullfight. In the only chapter that interrupts the novel's diegesis from chapter 3 onward, we learn how, a decade earlier, the ayllus of Puquio built a road to the coast in an astonishing twenty-eight days, in a friendly competition with ayllus from another town. Based on real events, this highway construction ended Puquio's isolation: On July 28, Peruvian Independence Day, "the first truck arrived in Puquio" (60). This communal show of strength, however, is doubled-sided. On the one side, the ayllus accomplish something the landowning class "had never dared to think about" (60). On the other side, however, the construction of the road functions as a possible solvent of the very community that built it. The highway places Puquio into greater contact with faraway markets, sparking incipient migration out of the highlands. This transformation is, to be sure, not all bad: Migrants stay in contact with their hometown by way of community centers in Lima, and chalos like Escobar bring revolutionary ideas back to Puquio. But it also accelerates the movement of money and

commodities into and out of the town: this is, after all, the same highway that takes bulls out of Puquio and brings in truckloads of goods.

The construction of the highway, then, simultaneously affirms communal strength while opening the door to its erosion. This dialectic of preservation and decay becomes even more pronounced in the novel's narration of the capture of the wild bull Misitu, which establishes a fissure among the four ayllus of Puquio on the grounds of shared communal belief. For members of one ayllu, the K'oñanis, this bull is a sacred and feared incarnation of an *auki*, or mountain deity. As legend has it, Misitu appeared suddenly one night, out of a flash of lightning on a lake. This story, the narrator intimates, emerged when Misitu—who is not part of Don Julián's herd—escaped from another ranch, "who knows whether it was from Wanakupampa, Oskonta, or farther away?" (81). As a result of Misitu's fame, members of a different ayllu, K'ayau, plan to capture him for use in the bullfight. Unlike the K'oñani, the K'ayau do not believe Misitu is an auki, and insist that he is just a "big *sallka*," or big bull (96). With authorization from Don Julián, members of the K'ayau ayllu essentially raid the K'oñani plain to capture Misitu. At least six hundred men advance across the plain, as "the K'oñanis ran out of all the fields, little farms, and stone huts" (105). The mobilization of communal action recalls the building of the road years earlier, but it also uncomfortably recalls the descriptions of the misti raids of ayllu lands in the first two chapters of the novel. The chief staff bearer of the K'ayau tells the K'oñanis that Don Julián has ordered them to take Misitu. A sorcerer who accompanies the staff bearers then tells the K'oñanis that an even higher authority, the auki himself, has mandated that Misitu belongs to the K'ayau, and will give them an even wilder bull later.

Something very strange is afoot, as one ayllu manipulates the beliefs of another to achieve its aims—aims that, as outlined above, have taken shape within a social landscape being actively altered by expanding commodity relations. Notably, the narration relates the competing visions over the auki/bull in a wholly realist fashion, insofar as it registers competing structures of belief without taking sides between them. It could be that the bull is an auki, but it is also possible that it is not. In this manner, Arguedas's depiction of indigenous myth is quite different from the modes we have come to know as the marvelous real or magical realism. In the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*, 1949), for example, set during the Haitian Revolution, the

omniscient narrator reports how the main character transforms into different animals in accordance with Afro-Caribbean beliefs. And in Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1967), everyone in Macondo, regardless of social status, accepts the same supernatural explanation of events without comment, in a stance that is internalized by the narrator. And although Arguedas would later infuse his own realist apparatus with elements of myth (a development discussed in chapter 5), *Yawar Fiesta* is most interested in calling our attention to how indigenous worldviews themselves begin to change as a result of the historical processes with which they interact, with highly unpredictable results.

To be sure, the resolution of the novel points to the strength of indigenous community against the designs of the subprefect, a cause that for Arguedas was definitely worth celebrating. But, dialectically, *as a result of winning*, older belief structures are undermined. For the Marxist chalos, the desacralization of the auki is a good thing, marking a first step toward revolutionary consciousness. As the student Escobar says: "They've killed an *auki*. And the day they kill all the *aukis* who are tormenting their minds … we shall lead this country to a glory no one can imagine" (121). In keeping with the profound ambiguity of the novel's resolution, Escobar is both right and wrong. He is correct that the indigenous collective, already in flux within an expanding commodity regime, would need to articulate a political project that frontally addressed the hacienda if it was to achieve true liberation. But he is wrong to presume that the eradication of myth would automatically lead to a higher form of revolutionary consciousness. This error hails, as Gavin Arnall has pointed out, from Escobar's rather condescending and elitist equation of myth with backwardness, a position that marks a "missed encounter" between Marxism and indigenous movements.[65] But the error hails more fundamentally, I think, from Escobar's failure to understand the possible consequences of secularization amid the chaotic unfolding of commodity relations in Puquio. In this setting, the death of aukis might simply erode the belief structures that undergirded communal structures, further accelerating their dissolution before revolutionary alliances could be formed. This possibility, already latent in the formal mechanics of *Yawar Fiesta*, is rendered explicit in one of Arguedas's later ethnological essays about Puquio. In a scant two decades, he notes in the essay, the town had transformed from "an old-

fashioned, predominantly colonial-style farming and livestock area into a trading center with an active economy." On the one hand, this transformation had emancipated indigenous communities from the despotism of the gamonales; on the other hand, however, "the process is removing Indians from the foundations on which their traditional Indian culture rests, even though it is not clear what elements are to replace those foundations." In the present, he notes somewhat pessimistically, it appears that communalism is being actively dissolved by "an open road to skeptical individualism."[66]

To its credit, *Yawar Fiesta* does not see the dissolution of indigenous communal structures and turn to "skeptical individualism" as a foregone conclusion. Nor, on the flip side, does the novel view true liberation as guaranteed. Instead, the realist apparatus tries to uncover the contradictions that historical movement produces, without collapsing into either romantic wish fulfillment or naturalistic fatalism. At the conclusion of *Yawar Fiesta*, a process of transformation has been initiated—there is no going back. The *indios* have had their way, but so too has the landlord. A possible liberation is unfolding, but perhaps not far behind it, freedom in the double sense. Of course, we are speaking of tendencies here, not iron laws; the forcefield of capital in Peru remained uneven and full of contradiction, just as new sites of resistance promised to reveal themselves at any moment. It was precisely for this reason that Arguedas relied on the novel as a means of seeing where highland indigenous communities were going at any given moment.

Such an endeavor seemed to require realist means of representation, since the entire aim of a novel like *Yawar Fiesta* was to understand, in granular fashion, how one moment, irrevocably altered by past events, opened onto the next, and so on. While I cannot hope to do justice here to the complexity of Arguedas's full novelistic oeuvre, I do wish to note, briefly, that the subsequent novels of his Andean cycle attempted to evoke further moments in the struggle for indigenous liberation: *Deep Rivers* examines indigenous resistance to the estate system from the first-person perspective of a misti boy, Ernesto—the same authorial alter ego who first appeared in "Agua"—who is in this novel the nephew of a cruel landowner. At the end of the novel, bonded serfs (*colonos*) sick with typhus march on the city's cathedral to demand a mass, braving machine gun fire. While not overtly political, this act calls forth the specter of forms of resistance that have not yet emerged but under the right circumstances might coalesce into a powerful

movement. Arguedas's epic realist project reaches its apex with the novel *Todas las sangres*, a sprawling novel that examines how an emergent indigenous movement navigates a path between a collapsing hacienda system, on the one hand, and a rising imperialism (via mining), on the other. At the same time, this novel marks the entrance of a decidedly nonrealist technique into Arguedas's oeuvre: When, at the end of the novel, the indigenous leader Rendón Willka is killed by police, he unleashes the forces of the mythic *yawar mayu*, or river of blood; the earth shakes so strongly that even capitalists in their offices in Lima feel it. Whether such an irruption of myth marks the strengthening or waning of a historical impulse in Arguedas's fiction is a matter I'll consider in chapter 5, when I examine his final novel, *The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below*, in relation to processes of urbanization and proletarianization. For the moment, however, I want to underscore the epic ambition that coursed through Arguedas's novels as a means of evoking epochal change in the twentieth-century Andes.

But just as such epic realist modes had to be discovered under concrete historical circumstances, they could also become exhausted under new ones. In some cases, an enlivened sense of history winnowed to produce the sense that time had come to a standstill, at least for peasants. It is to these contexts, and the decidedly anti-epic forms they inspired, that I now turn.

4

How Long Can the Peasantry Last? Anti-Epics of Rural Immiseration

The tiny plot of land turns from a "safety cushion" into the graveyard of Latin America's small holder.

Ernst Feder, "Regeneration and Degeneration of the Peasants"

A Frozen Present

The previous chapter examined how a strand of twentieth-century realism I call the agrarian epic attempted to chart processes of peasant liberation from the estate system that had dominated Latin American societies for centuries. This realist examination, sparked by world-historic revolutions in Mexico and Russia, as well as by intensifying rebellions and uprisings across the continent, produced granular and forward-moving visions. Never mechanically linear, modern agrarian epics posited a future that was open, even as history moved along its bad side. But literary forms, like the moments they mediate, do not last forever. As examined in previous chapters, a strand of romance that suppressed the crises facing landlords in the 1920s was forced to settle accounts with reality in the 1930s, giving rise to a strand of landowner realism. Beyond a certain point, however, this realist mode also exhausted itself, to signal either the abandonment of a landowner perspective altogether or the development of a gothic mode that

plumbed the psychic depths of protracted decline. In similar fashion, realist agrarian epics dedicated to examining the contradictory unfolding of peasant liberation gave way in subsequent moments to distinctly anti-epic modes in which historical movement seemed to have stopped altogether, at least for the peasantry.

As an initial example of this anti-epic sensibility, we can turn to “Nos han dado la tierra” (“They Have Given Us the Land”) by the Mexican literary giant Juan Rulfo, the inaugural short story from his landmark collection *El Llano en llamas* (*The Burning Plain*, 1953). A dwindling group of peasants walks for hours across a vast, sunbaked plain toward an initially unknown destination. The first-person narrator, unnamed, notes that while twenty-odd men set out on the walk, only four remain. As they walk for hours and hours, nothing much seems to happen. Everyone is quiet —“It’s been a while since we lost any desire to speak”—and the visual plane is dominated by the monotony of the seemingly endless plain.[1] At one point, the men stop to watch a single raindrop fall and disappear instantly into the earth, and then keep walking, without ceremony, when the rain doesn’t continue. The narrator reflects: “And it occurs to me that we’ve walked more than the distance we’ve covered. That’s what occurs to me. Had it rained, maybe other things would have occured to me” (4). This citation is instantly recognizable as “Rulfian” in its transmutation of plain peasant speech into a literary style that is simultaneously spare and concentrated, mundanely literal and deeply symbolic. This literary style, in turn, expresses a saturated temporality often associated with modernism. The characters in the stories from *The Burning Plain* and in his masterpiece novel *Pedro Páramo* operate in a present that has been intensified to such a degree that time seems to stop altogether.

The stunted present that characterizes “They Have Given Us the Land” serves as an initial example of the literary mode at the center of this chapter, one I call the anti-epic of rural immiseration. This mode, which takes as its primary point of reference the worsening material conditions of the peasantry in the mid-twentieth century, produces narratives in which time becomes concentrated to such a degree that historical movement itself seems to have come to a standstill. Unlike the agrarian epics studied in the previous chapter, the peasantry no longer occupies a time that is forward moving. The historical agency that the agrarian epic once located in the peasantry seems to have disappeared as well. This agency did persist in

iconography of the Mexican Revolution; Diego Rivera's murals depicting peasants defeating landlords or driving tractors is a case in point. A distinctly anti-epic sensibility began to dominate fiction, however, one that increasingly placed peasants in a circular or frozen present. This sensibility, while particularly pronounced in Rulfo's works, extended to a whole swathe of fiction from Mexico and other parts of Latin America between the 1930s and 1960s. We might think here of Graciliano Ramos's *Vidas secas* (*Barren Lives*, 1938), which recounts the circular voyage of an impoverished family fleeing ongoing drought in Northeastern Brazil; José Revueltas's *El luto humano* (*Human Mourning*, 1943), in which the last remaining smallholders in a Northern Mexican town ruined by a failed irrigation project await their deaths from a flood on a rooftop; or Manuel Otero's *Casas muertas* (Dead houses, 1955), set in a town ravaged by sickness and starvation in the Venezuelan plains region.

It is tempting to view the stunted temporality evoked by such texts as marking the ancient, circular, or mythical aspects of the peasantry itself. And yet one of the most salient aspects of this anti-epic mode is that the frozen present is nearly always revealed as the distinct product of a recent past. To return to Rulfo's story, the diegetic present of the story is interrupted by a flashback, a form of analepsis that appears again and again in anti-epics of rural immiseration as a means of explaining how the frozen present came into being. The flashback is structured as a dialogue between the peasants who set out on the journey and the government official who grants them a plot of land in the context of the sweeping land reform program introduced in the 1930s by the Lázaro Cárdenas administration. Land redistribution had been a central demand of insurgent peasants during the Mexican Revolution, but it was only under Cárdenas that state-mandated land reform transformed the Mexican countryside by granting hundreds of thousands of peasants inalienable parcels of land, known as *ejidos*, rent-free and in perpetuity.[2] But as "They Have Given Us the Land" reveals, freedom from the landowner, even with access to land, did not in itself secure peasant survival. In the flashback scene, the assembled peasants protest to the government official that the land they have been granted is not irrigated and its soil is eroded; as a result, corn—the main subsistence crop of the Mexican peasantry—won't grow there. The government official responds, in turn, that the state promised them *land*, not irrigated land. He then dismisses them with impatience by telling the men,

who are illiterate, to register a complaint in writing: “Now off you go. It’s the large estates you need to fight against, not the Government that’s giving you the land” (6). In contrast with the concentrated temporality of the diegetic present, the flashback unfolds dynamically, in a vein that is more recognizably realist than modernist.[3] Realist and modernist modes, however, do not always unfold in strict opposition; instead, as Fredric Jameson has maintained, the relationship between realism and modernism is more of a dialectic than an antinomy. Realism, in his analysis, contains within itself a forward-moving narrative mode (récit), but also a temporally concentrated descriptive mode (ekphrasis).[4] Conversely, modernism retains contact with a narrative principle even as it tips over into temporally concentrated description. In Rulfo’s story, narrative and descriptive modes not only coexist, but transform one another: The frozen present acquires a historical valence; inversely, the past is revealed to produce a dead end.

In “They Have Given Us the Land” and other rural anti-epics, the formal interactions between realist and modernist modes give expression to a specific historical transition: The decline of landowner roads to capitalism in Latin America and the emergence of peasant or smallholder roads.[5] This transition could unfold in different manners. The economic decay of the large estate might create an opening for smaller farmers; or, in more dramatic cases, state-mandated land reform could force the large estate out of existence altogether. In Mexico, land reform in the 1930s essentially ended the latifundio, as the state official in Rulfo’s story boasts. While reform was carried out most extensively in Mexico, it would gain traction across twentieth-century Latin America as a means of eliminating so-called feudalism in the countryside (characterized by labor coercion, land monopoly, and low levels of productivity) and expanding the domestic market. Bolivia in 1951, Peru in 1969, Chile between 1967 and ’73, and El Salvador in 1979 mark some of the most important chapters in this history. With the exception of Cuba and Nicaragua, where land reform took place in a socialist context, the peasant road brokered by land reform remained very much a road to capitalism in agriculture. On the one hand, land reform protected peasants from market forces by granting parcels of land that could not be bought or sold. At the same time, however, land reform nearly always existed within a capitalist economy that tended, over time, to push the poorest strata of the peasantry into the ranks of the proletariat, or—as was much more common in twentieth-century Latin America—the semi-

proletarianized pool of surplus labor that floated between subsistence and market economies. This process is already underway in Rulfo's story; by the end of the story, one of the four remaining men drops off in a town, leaving three of the original twenty-something to trudge on toward "the land they have given us" (8).

As commentators ranging from Alain de Janvry and Michel Gutelman to Roger Bartra have shown, mid-century land reforms simultaneously *preserved* a small peasantry within a larger capitalist economy and—as a contradictory result—eroded its very existence. In the previous chapter, we saw how the Peruvian author José María Arguedas gestured toward a similar dialectic of preservation and decay in relation to the highland indigenous agrarian commune. But in Arguedas's epic realist works, this dialectic was oriented toward the future; that is, it attempted to envision what might or might not occur under different historical circumstances. In Rulfo's anti-epic works, however, this dialectic acquires a wholly different valence. No longer open-ended and future-oriented, the tension between preservation and decay itself seems to reach a point of stasis. The analepsis at the center of "They Have Given Us the Land" and other anti-epics of rural immiseration alerts us, however, to the recent events that produced the impasse. The past movement buried within present stasis begs a new question about the future: For how long might the peasantry simultaneously persist and disappear? Alternately, under conditions of mounting immiseration, how long might the peasantry itself last?

As a general tendency, the capitalist mode of production separates cultivators from their means of subsistence in the soil. In his study of "primitive" or original accumulation in England, Marx reveals how successive waves of enclosure, together with the capture of agriculture by an emerging bourgeoisie, succeeded in transforming the peasantry into the world's first proletariat. Over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Marx writes, "we always find that this peasantry turns up again, although in diminished number, and in a progressively worse situation."[6] England was a particular case, however, and there was no means of knowing in advance for how long the peasantry would keep "turn[ing] up in diminished numbers" in different contexts, or whether different social processes—revolutionary or otherwise—might step in to reverse it. And indeed, as the case of mid-twentieth-century Mexico reveals, measures like

land reform could alternately preserve and erode the peasantry in a process that was so protracted it could appear endless.

In the remainder of this chapter, I explore how Juan Rulfo's literary works illuminate the curious persistence and disappearance of the peasantry in mid-twentieth-century Mexico, first by examining the ghostly stirrings of agrarian history in his story collection *The Burning Plain*, and then by examining how a set of stories transmute ever-eroding conditions of peasant subsistence into a distinctly nonrealist literary style that culminates in *Pedro Páramo*. With this, Rulfo's fiction increasingly produces a vision of a countryside populated by the living dead, a purgatorial existence that seems poised to last forever. But transitions, if they are to be called that, do end, as do the aesthetic means developed to represent them. The final part of the chapter thus takes leave of Rulfo to examine how the Chilean novelist José Donoso's *El lugar sin límites* (*Hell Has No Limits*, 1966), reveals a renewed realist impulse within the stunted present to imagine how a protracted transition might culminate in a definitive end of a peasant road—and the peasantry as such.

Fiction on the Farmer-Ejido Road to Capitalism

Juan Rulfo's works traveled along what Roger Bartra termed, in a riff on Lenin, the "farmer-ejido road to capitalism" in Mexico.[7] With this term, Bartra, from whose classic analysis of the ejido system I draw below, specifies a path to capitalism in which the old (in this case, Porfirian) landowner has been defeated, to be replaced by a sui generis peasant road by way of land reform. It is only by placing Rulfo's works along this path, I argue, that we can properly periodize them and, even more importantly, grasp the specificity of his aesthetic innovations. This move, in turn, allows us to appreciate Rulfo's stunning contributions to an understanding of the agrarian question in post-revolution Mexico.

It is no exaggeration to say that Rulfo's works have been some of the most resistant to this type of reading, on at least two registers. First, there has been a persistent tendency to view Rulfo's artistic works as the product of an isolated literary genius, the aesthetic quality of which resists sociological interpretation. This narrative of genius transforms Rulfo—himself the son of a landed family in provincial Jalisco destroyed by the

revolution and its aftermath—into a gnomic figure defined by hermeticism and opacity. Indeed, aside from Jorge Luis Borges, it is difficult to think of a Latin American author whose oeuvre is more mythologized than that of Rulfo. In both cases, the aura of genius itself serves as a kind of prohibition against historicization, as if a reading in purely aesthetic terms weren't equally reductive. Second, as an even more pronounced tendency, critics have assumed that the social raw material that Rulfo's works mediate—peasant society in Jalisco—is irreducibly traditional and archaic. This identification of the peasant as timeless and/or archaic extended to wide swathes of the mid-century Mexican intelligentsia. For the poet and essayist Octavio Paz, for example, the peasant is "a buried treasure, a seed that sprouts in the bowels of the earth, an ancient wisdom hiding among the folds of the land."[8] Rulfo's works have often viewed through a similarly mysticizing lens, as belonging to a world one critic calls "antediluvian."[9] More politically and historically driven interpretations of Rulfo's aesthetic, while showing a much greater appreciation for the complexity of the rural world he evokes, have nonetheless affirmed this vision of rural premodernity. Ángel Rama, for example, maintains that Rulfo's chief artistic achievement was the preservation of premodern social characteristics within modern literary forms, a process he named (after the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz) narrative transculturation. Using Rulfo as a key example of the practice, Rama argues that authors resignified archaic elements of rural culture "in the service of rediscovering and reviving the cultural legacy they had inherited in childhood and whose survival they wished to guarantee."[10]

But while there is little doubt that Rulfo and other mid-twentieth-century Latin American authors' texts mediate pre- or noncapitalist social content (whether by way of subsistence agriculture or syncretic Catholic-indigenous belief systems), it would be a mistake to identify these settings as somehow anterior to or outside of capitalism. Smallholding peasants, to be sure, maintained access to subsistence and became beneficiaries of state policies that extended credit and protected the prices of agricultural goods. In this sense, they were far from being fully dispossessed, "rightless proletarians" hurled onto the market with nothing left to sell but their labor power.[11] They were always threatened, however, with this possibility. For, as already revealed in the story "They Have Given Us the Land," land reform secured

a means of subsistence for a sizable sector of the Mexican peasantry, but under market conditions that continually eroded their existence.

In this way, the twentieth-century Mexican peasantry was not a mere vestige of tradition, but a social sector actively undergoing transformation within capitalism. As Bartra notes, the Mexican bourgeoisie that emerged triumphant from the revolution was forced to accept peasant insurgents' demands for land reform. As an added benefit, the ejido provided a means of ending the Porfirian-era latifundio. While many old landowners managed to hold on to or reconstitute their estates, land reform eliminated their land monopoly and hence promised to dynamize agricultural production. The reform sector, however, immediately created new blockages to accumulation, both because parcels were small, and because peasants' lack of access to credit and farm implements perpetuated low levels of productivity. Moreover, a prohibition on rent prevented the free circulation of capital.[12] It was thus that, as Bartra puts it, "the Mexican bourgeoisie buried one enemy, the latifundista, but created another, equally dangerous one: the minifundista peasant."[13] As part of an attempt to bury this new enemy, the state promoted the expansion of large-scale capitalist farms in the country's North, which became laboratories for early Green Revolution technologies such as high-yield hybrid wheat.[14] Meanwhile, the state's push to industrialize during the so-called Mexican Miracle of the 1940s and 1950s increasingly marginalized the subsistence sector. In this context, a stark contradiction emerged. For even as economic policy actively undermined the ejido, the state found itself in no position to eliminate it. The land reform sector, in addition to fulfilling the key political demand of a peasantry that had only recently engaged in mass insurgency, provided cheap agricultural goods for a growing urban proletariat and offered a shock absorber within an economy that could not fully absorb labor liberated from the countryside. The twentieth-century Mexican peasantry, deeply imbricated in these wide-reaching social processes, was thus not simply a remainder of "a dark past but the by-product of the growth of capitalism."[15]

Given this context, we might view Rulfo's fiction as not merely preserving some archaic strata by cultural means but as evoking a meaningful relationship to history in its own right. Along these lines, as Neil Larsen remarks in a relevant corrective to Rama's account, Rulfo's poetics owe "everything to … historical experience": namely, for Larsen, a present that cannot overcome the brutal forms of inequality that produced it,

leading to a sense that the past itself cannot be redeemed.[16] Building on this impulse, I want to examine how Rulfo's stories, rather than pointing toward some hoary, sealed-off past, point to something *new* in the making, particularly with respect to the peasantry. In particular, the mechanism of analepsis, which recurs throughout Rulfo's oeuvre, signals historical movement beneath the surface of an apparently motionless present. Moreover, these analepses help us to periodize different moments along the farmer-ejido road to capitalism. I explore elements of this periodization first through a consideration of the organization of *The Burning Plain* as a whole, and then by way of individual stories' ever-intensifying tendency toward nonrealist modes of representation to evoke the peasantry as a living dead.

Individual stories in Rulfo's collection allow us to grasp the historical roots of the stunted peasant present, as in "They Have Given Us the Land." But these roots are even more powerfully expressed by approaching the flashback of sorts that organizes the collection as a whole. Rulfo published two editions of *The Burning Plain* during his lifetime, in which different stories were added or taken out, but he always chose to open the collection with "They Have Given Us the Land" followed by "The Hill of the Comrades" (another story set in the wake of "the distribution"), inviting us to read the collection as a reflection on the fate of the Mexican peasantry in the aftermath of land reform.[17] This post–land reform moment has its anchor in the story Rulfo always chose to place in the dead center of the collection: the titular "The Burning Plain," set during the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution and its immediate aftermath. With this arrangement, Rulfo establishes the revolution as the collection's historical ground zero, so to speak, which in turn establishes a relationship to what came after. Even more importantly, the story also establishes the mode of epic literary realism examined in the previous chapter as the collection's formal baseline. This story, more than any other in the collection, links Rulfo's narrative project to the so-called "novel of the Mexican Revolution." At one point, for example, the first-person narrator refers to his group as *abajeños*, a term that recalls Azuela's *Los de abajo*, the foundational novel of the genre.[18] Beyond this reference, however, the story approximates the epic realist character of Azuela's novel. In contrast with other stories in the collection, which are governed by descriptive stasis (ekphrasis), "The Burning Plain" unfolds as a linear, forward-moving, and

action-packed plot (récit). And yet, in keeping with the mutually transformative quality of these registers, the epic realist mode Rulfo calls on has already acquired distinctly anti-epic qualities. In contrast with the peasant leader Demetrio Macías in *Los de abajo*, whose noble aspirations are crushed by forces beyond his control, the characters in "The Burning Plain" are from the outset small, petty, and cruel. In like manner, the heroic death that closes *Los de abajo* is exchanged for an aimless survival in Rulfo's story. After a stint in jail, the narrator meets up with the woman he "stole" during the revolution, and their children. This ending lends additional meaning to the *corrido* included as the story's epigraph: "Ya mataron a la perra pero quedan los perritos" (They killed the bitch, but the pups remain [56]). The rest of the stories in the collection examine the fates of these "pups"; as Edmond Cros notes, many are set in concrete moments of post-revolutionary history. These include 1930s land reform, but also moments of reactionary counterrevolution such as the Cristero Rebellion of 1920s ("The Night They Left Him Alone") and *sinarquista* movement of 1940s ("Anacleto Morones").[19]

As a collection, then, *The Burning Plain* stages a rupture and continuity between realist and modernist modes, a movement that allows us to identify concrete historical movement just beneath the surface of its apparent suspension. On a deeper level, this principle of rupture and continuity might be brought to bear on the short story form itself in ghostly relation to the novel form that predominated in Mexico from the nineteenth century onwards. While there is a compelling argument to be made that the short story bears a closer relationship to precapitalist social elements than does the novel (along the lines of Benjamin's "The Storyteller"), I propose we read Rulfo's short stories as internally discrete and temporally disordered shards of the realist novel, particularly the so-called "novel of the Mexican Revolution." Following Carlos Blanco Aguinaga's suggestion that there is something of the historical novel in *The Burning Plain*, we might approach Rulfo's collection as a historical novel in fragments, whose temporal disorder and internal separations by way of disconnected short stories nonetheless bear the imprint of this earlier form, much in the way that the stunted present bears the imprint of a more dynamic past by way of analepsis in individual stories.[20] In historical terms, the Mexican Revolution exerts a centripetal force over the entire collection, dispersing narratives and characters into a single, but irremediably fractured, fictional

world. The characters in stories such as “Talpa” and “La Cuesta de Las Comadres,” for example, inhabit similar social spaces of abject rural poverty, but they exist in separate universes. In contrast with the realist novel, which is driven forward by surprising interactions between characters, especially characters of different social classes (such as the peasant Demetrio Macías and the bourgeois Luis Cervantes), Rulfo’s stories formally prohibit such interactions. Significantly in this regard, Rulfo’s stories nearly always occupy themselves with peasants on their own, and not, as in previous moments, peasants in relation to landowners or bourgeois. Moreover, the short story form exerts a kind of wall that separates distinct characters, spaces, and temporalities from one another. In marked contrast with the spatial movement that had characterized previous novels of the Mexican Revolution, which often showcased far-ranging movement on horseback or trains between states such as Zacatecas and Aguascalientes (or even farther afield), Rulfo’s characters barely move at all, or, if they do, engage in circular, futile journeys. And while the novel of the Mexican Revolution relied upon such movement to produce a vision of Mexico as a totality, in Rulfo’s fiction it appears as a severed appendage of that totality, somehow existing on its own. Along these lines, while *Los de abajo*, a novel written in 1915, included references to telegraphs and trains, the stories in *The Burning Plain*, in spite of its publication in 1955, avoid all references to equivalent markers like the highway or automobile. This omission is all the more noteworthy given the fact that Rulfo’s own incursions into rural areas in the 1950s had been predicated on such infrastructure, both as a representative for a local subsidiary of the BF Goodrich tire company, and as a writer and photographer for the guidebook *Caminos de México*.[21]

The temporal and spatial isolation conveyed by *The Burning Plain* might easily identify characters as living in a world anterior to or outside of capitalist modernity. Their ghostly relation to the novel of the Mexican Revolution, however, allows us to glimpse the historical processes through which narrative units, characters, and locales *became* isolated from one another, not simply as an effect of tradition, or as an erasure of reality, but as a distinct expression of ongoing processes of rural transformation in the aftermath of this world-altering event. Additional evidence for this claim can be found when we consider that the principle of isolation embedded within the collection is accompanied by a splintering of perspective that has

become nearly synonymous with modernism in other contexts. For whereas the realist novel attempts to achieve some distance from its characters in its evocation of a totality, the stories in *The Burning Plain* employ techniques of narrative focalization that limit perspective to the thought processes of a single individual. Even when stories showcase a larger collective—the ejido in "They Have Given Us the Land" or a family as in "Because We're So Poor"—characters experience the world as individuals who appear as atomized as any wage worker.

At the same time, however, we must not go too far in assuming that the social processes assumed by modernist poetics in other contexts apply equally or in the same way to Rulfo's characters. In a very real sense, there is something noncapitalist in the social world Rulfo's fiction evokes, not in the form of some unchanging cultural essence, but by way of subsistence economies. In this way, elements of the peasant society truly do exist as a noncapitalist substrate within capitalism, as part of what the Marxist tradition refers to as uneven (or uneven and combined) development. Materialist literary critics, in turn, have frequently identified twentieth-century modernisms as expressing not only the emergence of new objects, experiences, and temporalities under capitalism, but the persistence of old ones alongside the new. Here we can point, for example, to Fredric Jameson's periodization of European modernism as a mode that corresponds simultaneously to the advance of capitalism by way of imperialism and, in hindsight, the incompleteness of that regime by way of a peasant substrate. Such a persistence can be sensed, for example, in Brecht's sentences, which for Jameson are "as compact as peasants' wooden bowls and spoons," or in the persistence of a register of village gossip in Joyce's *Ulysses*.[22] Postmodernity, in turn, marks for Jameson the evaporation of this specific form of unevenness. Perry Anderson, in turn, has hypothesized that modernism tends to crop up in social conjunctures *triangulated* by the lingering dominance of an aristocratic landed class, the expansion of consumer society, and "the imaginative proximity of social revolution."[23] More recently, the Warwick Research Collective has continued in a similar vein by proposing that peripheral and semi-peripheral literatures register different types of uneven and combined development through the creative use of "irrealist" forms.[24]

Building on such inquiries, it is clear that Rulfo's fiction not only registers this uneven development, but—against the grain of its temporal

stagnation—actively periodizes it. During the period in which Rulfo wrote and published his fiction, the peasantry still formed the majority of the Mexican population, but that proportion was declining. To paraphrase Marx, the Mexican peasantry kept turning up, but always in diminished numbers and under worse conditions. Land reform slowed this process, but did not stop it. Some statistics are useful for catching a glimpse of this overall picture. In 1940, around 65 percent of the Mexican population labored in the countryside, mostly as peasants. By 1950, this percentage had declined to 60 percent; by 1960, it stood at 55 percent, shares that continued to decline in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, to result in a mere 13 percent today.[25] Rulfo, of course, did not witness, or even predict, this massive shift in its entirety. His literary works, though, gravitated toward situations in which the very limits of peasant existence were being tested. In this sense, Rulfo's fiction, in addition to revealing the historical roots of a seemingly frozen present, also uncovers glimmers of movement in that very present. The evacuated present, that is, reveals its own internal movement: on the one side, a tendency toward an immiseration so severe it brings characters to the brink of death; on the other, the prolongation of that state beyond all temporal and physical limits. And it is here, I would venture, that Rulfo provides his most insightful reading of the twentieth-century agrarian question, in his evocation of the peasantry as Mexico's living dead.

Periodizing Purgatory: The Road to Comala

Three stories from *The Burning Plain*—"Because We're So Poor," "Paso del Norte," and "Luvina"—all of which take place in the aftermath of the 1930s land reform, might be approached as thought experiments asking just how far immiseration might proceed before peasants literally and figuratively cease to exist in earthly form. These three stories were written, coincidentally or not, in succession.[26] What ultimately allows us to periodize them as marking successive moments in a history of peasant immiseration, however, is not so much their original dates of publication, or even plots, but their formal movement away from realist conventions. Rulfo's stories depict peasant immiseration in increasingly ghostly terms, to eventually produce an image of this class as entrapped in a kind of life in death, or death in life, seemingly without end. Arranged in this manner,

Rulfo's literary exploration of the farmer-ejido road leads us straight to Comala, the fictional town in *Pedro Páramo* poised outside of time and space, "at the very mouth of Hell."[27]

This journey begins with "Because We're So Poor," which explores a peasant family's Herculean efforts to survive amid mounting disaster. The story begins in a manner common in Rulfo's stories, with a focalized first-person narrator, in this case an adolescent boy, speaking from within a deteriorated present: "Things here are going from bad to worse" (19). As in other stories, this present is informed by a recent past. First, we learn that the father lost his alfalfa crop; then, even worse, a flood carried away the family's cow, "La serpentina." Biblical overtones abound to underscore the possibility of punishment and ejection from the negligible "Eden" of the peasant family unit. As the narrator reveals, the cow had been purchased as a dowry for his twelve-year-old sister Tacha. Without the cow, the family's only "little bit of capital," she is likely to become a "whore" (21), the fate suffered by her two older sisters in the nearby town. The limited perspective of the narrator makes it impossible to know whether his sisters have indeed become sex workers, or whether their mere exit from the patriarchal household has marked them as such. What is clear, however, is that there is a fine, razor-thin threshold of survival within the peasant economy. In "Because We're So Poor," this threshold is regulated by gender, via a collapsing dowry system. The last lines of the story envision Tacha's probable fate as a "whore" destined for wage labor outside of the family unit. Describing her sobs upon losing the cow, the narrator notes that "those two little breasts of hers move up and down, nonstop, as if just now they've begun to fill out and lead her toward perdition" (23). At the point this fate is sealed, and no further movement seems possible, Rulfo posits something not quite real: the sudden sprouting of breasts that seem to seal the child's fate as a sex worker. The image, wrenching to say the least, transmits the sense that Tacha's body has been occupied by a force external to herself. While coded in biological terms, its driving logic is that of the larger system of immiseration alluded to in the title. Conjuring this external force with the words "as if" (a constant in Rulfo's oeuvre), the story points to the ghostly forces threatening to make the girl *work* (as reflected in the Spanish verb *trabajar*, 56), not within the family unit, but as a wage earner outside its purview.

On one side, “Because We’re So Poor” points toward a gendered form of depeasantization by way of sex work. But in keeping with the contradictory logic of the ejido identified above, the story can be read as marking the opposite process: the *preservation* of the family unit through a kind of self-cannibalization. Along these lines, the story’s title functions as an explanation for not only Tacha’s likely fate, but also the general state of affairs that dissolves the smallholding family, in this case through the ejection of unmarriageable women and continued self-exploitation of its remaining members. Peasants, in this manner, persist under mounting conditions of immiseration, in a manner that seems to defy material limits. In an interview, the author puzzled over this very paradox by remarking that he could not fathom how peasants in Jalisco, faced with eroded soil, no credit, and grinding poverty, could at the same time produce the majority of the corn grown in Mexico: “It’s a very poor state. But people work hard. I don’t know how they can produce so much.”[28] The story “Because We’re So Poor” provides one possible answer: They self-exploit to the point of self-cannibalization; or, put differently, they self-cannibalize so that they might continue to self-exploit.

This literary resolution resonates, on the one hand, with a well-known position that would come to be associated with the Soviet agronomist Alexander Chayanov, who argued that the peasantry would always persist, because its capacity for self-exploitation was limitless. Even when not making a profit, peasants would continue to cultivate; losses might be compensated for with additional labor on the part of the family unit. In the Mexican social sciences in the 1970s, this position became associated with so-called *campesinistas* like Rodolfo Stavenhagen and Arturo Warman. On the other hand, however, Rulfo’s fiction also resonates with the Leninist-inflected position that there were indeed limits to self-exploitation, and that the peasantry would be eroded by capitalism to the point of disappearance. In Mexico, this position came to be associated with *descampesinistas* like Roger Bartra.[29] The point is not so much to place Rulfo in one or another camp, since the very existence of the debate in the 1970s reveals that there was still no definitive answer as to whether the Mexican peasantry would persist or essentially become extinct. It is, however, worth noting that Rulfo’s fiction anticipated this debate by decades by developing aesthetic experiments that tested the very limits of peasant existence.

These limits are further tested in the story “Paso del Norte,” which plots a second moment of deterioration along the farmer-ejido road and with it, a further move toward a nonrealist aesthetic. The story recounts the circular voyage of a would-be migrant who travels to the United States to join what we can safely assume to be the *bracero* guestworker program initiated in the 1940s. We learn of these events from an extended dialogue between a son and his estranged father. The son, an impoverished pig merchant with no land of his own, can no longer feed his wife and five children; he asks his father, a relatively more stable producer of artisanal fireworks, to care for his family in his absence. The father, one of Rulfo’s many derelict patriarchs, had long ago abandoned his son. At least a vestige of responsibility remains, however, and he grudgingly agrees to care for his son’s family by saying there’s enough food to feed a few more: “No one ever dies of hunger” (101). Immediately following this dialogue, the story enacts an abrupt temporal and narrative break to signal the son’s movement to the northern border. An omniscient voice takes over to evoke the multitude of migrants arriving in Ciudad Juárez: “From the ranches the people came down into the towns, people from the towns took off for the cities. In the cities people disappeared, dissolving into the crowd” (102). The geographical displacement outlined in the passage occasions, in the space of a paragraph, an enlargement of perspective not seen anywhere else in Rulfo’s ouevre, which allows us to catch a glimpse of a mass process of migration from ranches to towns and cities.

After this brief foray out of rural Mexico, though, the story returns to the father and son’s dialogue in the wake of the latter’s return. In this final section, the son describes his unsuccessful attempts to cross the border. The father, in keeping with his past betrayals, reports that he has sold the son’s house to cover the cost of his family’s upkeep, which far from solving the problem has created a new debt for legal costs. The son promises his father that he’ll find “a bit of work” (104) to pay him back, and sets off again, either to find his wife, who has reportedly taken up with a muleteer in his absence, or to continue his itineracy.

We have seen this perseverance in other stories: “They Have Given Us the Land” ends with three remaining *ejidatarios* trudging toward their destination; “Because We’re So Poor” ends with the probable ejection of a third daughter from the family. We are in a completely new phase, however, in “Paso del Norte,” which explores the fate of peasants ejected from the

subsistence economy who are in turn ejected from the wage economy, only to return to the agrarian sector in even more precarious conditions than before. Roger Bartra has described such back-and-forth movement as an instance of "permanent primitive accumulation," in which peasants were immiserated to such a degree that they were forced to become proletarians; the wage economy, however, could never employ all of the labor liberated from the countryside. So long as a sizable reform sector existed, this labor could return, at least for a time, to the subsistence economy. In this scenario, "a good part of the peasant population remains tied to the land, but under such conditions of misery and pauperism that they can scarcely be classified as farmers."[30] Paradoxically, then, the separation of peasants from their means of subsistence remained ongoing ("permanent") and—so long as a reform sector existed as a buffer zone within the capitalist economy—incomplete.

Written more than two decades earlier than Bartra's analysis, "Paso del Norte" is animated by the sense that there is no apparent end to the cycle of peasant immiseration, even as it moves through the wage economy. Rather than merely reflect an observation gleaned from the social sciences, however, Rulfo's story explores peasant immiseration in a manner only fiction might do, by testing the very limits between life and death. This is, at least, what Rulfo begins to suggest by way of another key formal break in "Paso del Norte." Immediately following the paragraph narrating the migrant multitude's experience at the border, the son begins his dialogue with the father again with the startling words,

> —They killed us, Father.
> —Who?
> —Us. While crossing the river. They shot us full of bullets till they killed us all. (102)

The portion of the dialogue is disorienting, to say the least. If the son has been killed, what is he doing speaking to the father in the here and now? The language might indeed be metaphorical. But this is, after all, the author of *Pedro Páramo*, a novel in which dead people speak from their graves; and so the declaration "they killed us, Father" by a man who appears to be living is worthy of note. Along these lines, while "Paso del Norte" is widely considered Rulfo's least accomplished story (and was excised by the author in the 1970 edition of *The Burning Plain*), it marks a key moment in the development of nonrealist means to evoke peasant immiseration. If the

ending of “Because We Are Very Poor” provided an initial moment of labor becoming alienated from itself in the image of Tacha’s body taken over by some otherworldly force, “Paso del Norte” represents a further moment, one in which peasant labor itself acquires ghostly characteristics. Unable to incorporate itself fully into the subsistence economy or the wage economy, and yet unable to avoid either, Rulfo’s disorienting dialogue gives a new inflection to the dialectic of dissolution and perseverance characteristic of the farmer-ejido road to capitalism: The peasantry is dead, but somehow still carrying on; alive, but scarcely so.

In metaphorical terms at least, peasants already appear as a kind of living dead in “Paso del Norte,” and their agonic existence as a kind of purgatory without end. These connections are cemented in the story “Luvina,” one of the latest stories included in *The Burning Plain* and widely considered the precursor to the novel *Pedro Páramo*. Conventions of realism reach definite limits in “Luvina,” a story that recounts the experience of a rural schoolteacher in the eponymously named town. On the one hand, the schoolteacher’s remembrances—alternately spoken aloud and thought in silence—mark a notable progression with respect to the social processes examined in previous stories: Luvina is what we commonly call a ghost town, nearly emptied of its inhabitants. The only people left, the narrator notes, are “the oldest of the old and those yet to be born” (89), in a clear reference to widespread urban out-migration. It is perhaps for this reason that the perspective of the story shifts to an outsider, one who registers a disappearance that can no longer be observed internally. But if the further dwindling of the peasant population marks a new stage of depeasantization, it is one that causes time—and with it, any notion of stable reality—to break down almost entirely. Quantity becomes quality: Beyond a certain point, the double-sided dwindling/persistence of the peasantry begins to transform the narrative apparatus from within, into the territory of irreality and timelessness. Like several of Rulfo’s other stories, “Luvina” begins in a diegetic present that returns to a previous moment. In what appears to be a bar, a schoolteacher relates his past experiences in Luvina to a (silent) interlocutor, whom we might presume to be another teacher on his way to the same town. But whereas in other stories this past took the form of some event (land redistribution, a flood, a journey to the US border), in “Luvina” the past invoked by the narrator has been completely emptied of temporal progression, a move that further breaks down distinctions between past and

present, life and death, reality and unreality. The narrator describes the town as if it were dead: Its neighboring mountaintops appear “as if it were a dead man’s crown” (84); its dwindling inhabitants circulate “as if they were shadows” (88). Importantly, the speaker can’t specify how long he spent in Luvina among the shadows, because “time lasts forever there” (89) (“el tiempo es muy largo,” 118). Time is so “long,” in fact, that the unnamed speaker says that it is in fact “Purgatory” (91). The purgatorial state of Luvina, recounted from a temporal and spatial distance, nonetheless seeps into the diegetic present, infusing it with a sense of unreality as well: An initial lack of diacritical markers unmoors the first two paragraphs of the text from its context as speech, disorienting the reader. The addressee, in turn, never speaks, leading the reader to question whether he is actually present. In this manner, the reader is asked to give some credence to the notion that the speaker—like the one in “Paso del Norte”—inhabits some space between life and death: “I lived there. I left my life there” (85).

But one step is needed to complete this complete breakdown of the narrative barriers separating present from past, and life from death: a literalization of the past subjunctive that imagines a town’s inhabitants “as if” they were ghosts, to a fictional universe in which everyone is, in fact, a ghost; and a transformation of the metaphor of purgatory into an actual purgatory from which there is no escape, at least for pauperized peasants. This is, in effect, the organizing principle of Rulfo’s celebrated 1955 novel *Pedro Páramo*. Like “Luvina,” the novel begins as a dialogue initially unmarked as such, which in this case recounts the descent of the first-person narrator, Juan Preciado, into Comala in search of his estranged father, “a man named Pedro Páramo” (1). The most famous literary trick employed in the novel is the revelation, nearly halfway through, that Juan Preciado is in fact narrating the entire story from the small grave he shares with a pauperized woman, Dorotea, and that everyone he met in Comala is also dead. Juan Preciado’s first-person narrative, set in a purgatorial present (known to critics as narrative strand “A”) is accompanied by an omnisciently narrated set of episodes, set in the past, that recount the rise and fall of the eponymously named pre-revolution landowner and strongman Pedro Páramo (narrative strand “B”). We will recognize this bipartite structure, in which a frozen present is juxtaposed to a relatively more dynamic past, from the stories in *The Burning Plain*. And indeed, I would argue that *Pedro Páramo* takes its specific form as an extended

analeptic interplay between past and present. What is different here, beyond the move to the unified form of the novel, is that the present is not just frozen; it is, quite literally, dead. Likewise, the past—which stretches from the Porfirian era through the Mexican Revolution to some point in the 1920s or 1930s—emerges as the undead substrate of that present. Paradoxically, perhaps, coming on the heels of stories that nearly completely submerged a narrative impulse toward temporal concentration as a means of evoking deepening but seemingly endless processes of peasant immiseration, *Pedro Páramo* marks a strong return of narrative. The episodes pertaining to narrative strand "B," while presented in nonlinear fashion, are at bottom realist, and can be reassembled into a recognizable temporal arc that recounts the rise of the eponymous landowner as an all-powerful cacique through tactics of trickery and violence, and his downfall as the result of his unreturned love for Susana San Juan. Notably, it is unrequited love—and not the Mexican Revolution or land reform—that create the conditions for Pedro Páramo's demise. After townspeople refuse to mourn Susana, the landowner resolves to destroy them: "I'll cross my arms and Comala will die of hunger" (116). The once-abundant farmlands recalled by Juan Preciado's mother transform into the barren and desiccated landscape the character encounters at the beginning of the novel. So, too, the novel suggests, begins a period in which Comala comes to be populated by the living dead, souls unable to make a full transition from life to afterlife. As one of the novel's central metaphors, these characters belong to neither heaven nor hell, but the in-between state of purgatory.

Elsewhere I have explored how the bipartite structure of *Pedro Páramo* establishes the pre-revolution Porfirian past—during which the vast majority of Mexican peasants became landless under the rule of large estates—as the prehistory of a present in which peasants have been freed from the rule of the landowner, but under conditions of abandonment and immiseration so severe as to appear as a kind of living death.[31] For reasons of space and focus, I will not reprise that reading in its entirety here; instead, I will limit my discussion of the novel to the points raised in the discussion of *The Burning Plain* above. For, once placed in dialogue with the stories from that collection, *Pedro Páramo*—often approached, like Rulfo himself, as a solitary entity—becomes apprehensible as terminus point in the author's exploration of peasant immiseration along the farmer-

ejido road to capitalism, beyond which no further movement seems possible.

If, as noted above, the short stories comprising *The Burning Plain* function as separate, discrete, atomized entities, *Pedro Páramo*, as a novel, integrates them into a single literary work, in a single fictional world named Comala. This integration, in turn, opens onto a considerable amplification of the social world evoked by Rulfo, both in terms of its expanded universe of characters (the landowner Pedro Páramo, the priest Rentería, the pauper Damiana, the muleteer Abundio, and so on), and in terms of its historical referents. The historical horizon of *The Burning Plain* is the Mexican Revolution and its aftermath; the formal organization of the stories presumes peasants who have been left on their own as smallholders. The historical horizon of *Pedro Páramo* stretches further back to the rise and fall of the large estate between the regime of Porfirio Díaz and the onset of the revolution. This past, however, interacts with the present in a formally similar way to the analeptic stories pioneered in *The Burning Plain*, though now with an entirely nonrealist premise. Narrative strand A unfolds in a present in which everyone, including the narrator, is already dead. Narrative strand B interrupts this present with a series of flashbacks to the time when Pedro Páramo was alive. One strange effect of this arrangement, among many, is that it gives the sense that the Porfirian past remains alive, while the post-revolution present is dead. And in some sense, as in his stories, the narrative strand dedicated to the landowner Pedro Páramo explains how a frozen present came into being; in this case, through acts of trickery, violence, and, finally, abandonment.

As a key element of the argument I've been advancing, the narrative strand of *Pedro Páramo* set in the diegetic present imagines a peasant world on its own, submerged in a literal purgatory. Importantly, Pedro Páramo's voice does not meld with those of trapped peasant souls in narrative strand A; it can only be heard in narrative strand B. We might imagine that Pedro, together with his son Miguel and the priest Rentería, who sells absolutions to the rich and denies them to the poor, has passed this purgatorial state, to enter heaven or hell. By contrast, the peasants who populate narrative strand A are souls in limbo who are not permitted to make this transition. Their inability to do so is directly related to concrete moments of history outlined in the narrative strand dedicated to the landowner, which stretch from the Porfirio Díaz regime to the Mexican Revolution and, in the 1920s, the

Cristero counterrevolution. In this manner, the purgatorial state of the present appears as both timeless and historical; or, rather, it has become timeless as the result of a specific history. When Juan Preciado, entering Comala for the first time, asks why everything looked so sad, his (dead) guide Abundio responds matter-of-factly, “It’s the times, señor” (2). And while the peasants entrapped in purgatory don’t stay on earth long enough to see land reform (they seem to die in the 1920s, after the Cristero Rebellion), their curious state as a speaking dead consigned to purgatory for all of eternity bears a striking resemblance to the immiserated and abandoned ejido sector. The rural sociologist Ernst Feder was surely not thinking of Rulfo when he noted that the smallholding “turns from a ‘safety cushion’ into the graveyard of Latin America’s small holder.”[32] And yet this is precisely the metaphor that Rulfo’s novel literalizes, in a manner that only fiction might. Rulfo takes a real social principle—peasant immiseration within a hair’s breadth of existence—to its logical conclusion, but only by breaking fully with reality. The resulting literary feat crystalizes a social principle in a completely novel manner, through an image of the peasantry as a living dead.

Purgatory, in this manner, is not an otherworldly place; what makes it so terrible is that it is a place on earth, existing in the here and now. As Jean Franco notes in her classic reading of *Pedro Páramo*, the cash nexus has already hollowed out the sacred long before the souls of Comala enter their purgatorial state.[33] Whatever purgatory they experience was generated in this world, by humans. Any redemption or condemnation, we might conclude, would also have to come from human action. Either resolution, however, seems to be made impossible by the novel’s own conceit of purgatory, which does indeed seem endless. The end of the novel, in which Pedro Páramo dies and disintegrates “as if he were a pile of rocks” opens straight onto the purgatorial state in which it begins, with no escape in sight (123).

In *Pedro Páramo* Rulfo finds his most sophisticated and evocative metaphor for a stunted and immiserated rural present. But it is perhaps in its figuration of transition itself that the novel asserts its greatest relevance to social theory. The peasants in Comala, left to their own devices, have failed to make a full transition between life and death. This image of stasis might be considered an expression of what in Rulfo’s lifetime remained an intractable dialectic of preservation and dissolution of the small peasantry, a

class that was always dwindling but always persisting, though in ever-smaller numbers. Is it any wonder his masterpiece novel could not imagine any end to this state? Rulfo's inability to see an end to this transition is a mark of his being enmeshed in an ongoing history that, despite seeming motionless, was indeed unfolding, even if its final outcome had not yet been defined.

Rulfo produced no major work after *Pedro Páramo*. Indeed, the seeming endlessness of the purgatorial state the novel projects is perhaps indicative of a dead end Rulfo could not exit in subsequent works. To use one of Rulfo's favored rhetorical formulations, it is *as if* his narrative apparatus could not escape the purgatorial existence it generated as a means of evoking peasant immiseration because it really did seem, to use Bartra's term, "permanent." But purgatory was always a historical category for Rulfo; as such, it did have stark limits and endpoints, though they were not visible during his lifetime. To recall statistics from above, while Rulfo was writing, the peasantry remained the absolute majority of the Mexican population. In 1950, the decade he published his two major works, 60 percent of people labored in agriculture, mainly as smallholding peasants. By 1980, the decade the author died, this percentage had fallen to 37 percent. A definite transition had occurred, but the process had still not concluded. But a devastating financial crisis in 1982, followed by the privatization of the ejido sector as part of the North American Free Trade Agreement, would conclude the cycle.[34] Today, only around 13 percent of the Mexican population works in the countryside, a high proportion of them in agricultural wage labor because the subsistence sector has largely been eliminated. Mexico is in this sense a largely post-agrarian, post-peasant society. Notwithstanding pockets of resistance in states like Chiapas, where indigenous communal organization remains strong, capitalism has eliminated the buffer zone of subsistence. We need not romanticize the peasant past to recognize that this elimination has resulted in massive social devastation, as millions of people have been forced to migrate or eke out an existence in what have become violent zones of social sacrifice across rural Mexico. This present itself seems evacuated of futurity; Rulfo's fiction, read today, allows us to catch a glimpse of the historical movement embedded even within ostensibly timeless categories like purgatory.

The Limits of Smallholder Hell

During his lifetime, Rulfo was barred from seeing how the purgatorial state of Mexican peasants might give way to something else. Turning to a context of ongoing, though much more modest, land reform in 1960s Chile, however, José Donoso's 1966 novel *El lugar sin límites* (*Hell Has No Limits*) offers a vision of how a peasant road to capitalism might come to a definitive end. As shorthand for understanding the different moments of transition grasped by these authors, the temporal protraction of purgatory in Rulfo gives way to the finality of hell in Donoso. Paradoxically, however, this finality is precisely what reawakens a realist impulse in Donoso's novel. For whereas the purgatorial existence of peasants occasions a full break with realism in Rulfo, their condemnation to hell paradoxically sparks the reemergence of a future-oriented narrative principle deep within the folds of temporal stasis.

Set in the mid-1960s and moving between modes of omniscient narration and free indirect discourse, *Hell Has No Limits* unfolds during a single winter Sunday in Estación El Olivo, a dying town on the edge of a large wine estate in Chile's Central Valley. It opens in the morning, as the main character, Manuela, a female-identified queer man (*loca*) and co-owner of the town brothel, awakens with a start. She realizes that Pancho Vega—a man who months earlier assaulted her, ripping her tattered but prized *sevillana* dress—is in town. Manuela pulls on her pants (the reader's first inkling that she was born a man) and, with a mixture of fear and desire, prepares for the night's performance. Over the course of the day, we meet a series of characters that evoke the social landscape of Estación El Olivo: among them, Don Alejo, the aged but still-powerful owner of the large estate after which the town is named; Manuela's daughter and manager of the brothel, La Japonesita, who dreams of buying a Wurlitzer jukebox once the landowner brings electricity to the town; and Pancho, a man who was born to peons on Don Alejo's estate but who has since left to become a truck driver in the nearby city of Talca. Over the course of the day, encounters between these characters produce a narrative tension that culminates in a shocking and definitive resolution: After having been warned by Don Alejo to stay away from Manuela, Pancho and his brother-in-law Octavio, the owner of a gas station in Talca, arrive at the brothel late at night. In a drunken haze, Pancho gropes and kisses Manuela. Once he is

observed by his brother-in-law, however, Pancho turns on Manuela in a fit of homophobic rage. Two men proceed to viciously beat her and leave her for dead in the bramble separating the brothel from Don Alejo's estate.

For obvious reasons, *Hell Has No Limits* is most often approached today through an optic of queer identity and desire, one that, in turn, draws from Donoso's own closeted queerness. Such readings have provided a salutary corrective to the unexamined homophobia of early interpretations of the novel, which pointed to homosexuality as generalized allegory of decadence and abjection. At the same time, however, the novel's horrific resolution cannot be understood outside the property relations at the center of the novel and, indeed, Chilean agrarian society in the 1960s. From this vantage point, *Hell Has No Limits* is a novel about a frustrated smallholder road to capitalism, one that poses a question very much in line with Juan Rulfo's anti-epics of rural immiseration: How long, and under what conditions, can a precarious smallholding class hang on in the course of uneven capitalist development?

A major difference in historical context between Mexico and Chile must be attended to before we proceed with this line of analysis: Whereas Rulfo was writing in the aftermath of a major agrarian revolution that destroyed the latifundio system, giving way to a major experiment with land reform, such a revolution had not taken place in Chile. During the colonial period Chile had been a sparsely populated and remote outpost. After independence in the nineteenth century, the country became integrated into world commodity networks on the basis of mining, which in turn sparked incipient processes of urbanization and industrialization. The landed elite, however, retained a firm grip on the countryside, and, through intermarriage with an ascendent capitalist class, economic and state power.[35] Until well into the 1960s, the latifundio (*fundo* in Chilean parlance) monopolized most of the country's arable land. It is estimated that some 7 percent of estates dominated up to 65 percent of the country's land, while *minifundistas* (37 percent of the farming population) had access to only 1 percent of the land.[36] Unsurprisingly, landowners were loath to relinquish their power and privilege and thwarted even the most modest attempts at reform. It was thus that the fundo exercised an overweening influence over rural society and, to some extent, Chilean society as a whole.[37]

This context helps explain why Donoso—himself an urban, middle-class author with deep familial ties to landowners—nearly always located his

novelistic world in the latifundio, to focus especially on the personalistic domination of servants by masters. Along these lines, the main characters of *Hell Has No Limits* are bonded to a powerful landowner, even though they are no longer peasants: Pancho, for example, was born the son of resident peons (*inquilinos*) on Don Alejo's estate and enlisted as a childhood playmate to the landowner's daughter, who later dies of typhus. It is also rumored that Pancho might himself be the illegitimate son of Don Alejo. Though Pancho succeeded in leaving the estate to become a truck driver in Talca, his newfound independence from patriarchal relations is an illusion. As part of the master/servant dialectic that extends beyond the boundaries of the estate, Don Alejo financed Pancho's truck with a loan and is able to call him back to Estación el Olivo at will to explain why he hasn't kept up with payments. This is evidenced in a humiliating exchange in which Don Alejo sets his four guard dogs on Pancho, calling them off only at the last minute, then reprimands him for forgetting "the way to the house where you were born."[38] For her part, Manuela was born on a neighboring estate from which she was violently ejected when she was discovered kissing a boy. In the novel's present, she is part-owner of a brothel. Yet she too remains deeply imbricated in master/servant relations: She sees in Don Alejo a "Good Lord, with his China-blue eyes" (9), and fantasizes scenarios in which he protects her from Pancho: "And Don Alejo tells him to leave me alone, not to bother me, that I'm decent folk and after all he's just an *inquilino*'s son" (27, translation modified). In contrast with Rulfo's social world, then, composed of peasants left to their own devices, Donoso's novel is filled with *former* peasants who nonetheless remain in thrall to patriarchal power as members of a highly precarious rural petty bourgeoisie.

Despite these differences in context and emphasis, however, Donoso's novel employs many of the same narrative techniques found in Rulfo's fiction, particularly in its evocation of an immiserated rural present. Here we can note the critical commonplace that the general atmosphere of *Hell Has No Limits* is airless and oppressive. The novel, as noted, is circumscribed to twenty-four hours, a conceit recognizable to us from modernist classics like *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Ulysses*. In contrast with those novels, though, the day depicted in Donoso's novel unfolds against a backdrop of extreme poverty. As an example, Manuela cooks her breakfast on a wood-burning stove, contemplating a sex worker, Lucy, returning to her room to sleep: "Now she'll get back into bed, the slut, and spend all

afternoon between the filthy sheets, eating bread, sleeping, getting fat. Of course, that's why she has so many clients. Because she's fat" (15). On levels of both content (the description of squalor) and form (the introjection of Manuela's gossipy consciousness into free indirect discourse), progressive narrative movement is thwarted by a recursive stasis laden with images of shocking immiseration. Or, as La Japonesita muses in another instance of free indirect discourse, time in El Olivo "had an eerie way of stretching itself, today seemed short, tomorrow endless, and you never knew in what part of the night you were" (157). This temporal distension has as its chief architectural referent the muddy and dark brothel itself, which, we learn early in the novel, is literally sinking into the muddy ground. Like Rulfo, Donoso chooses to focalize this present solely from the perspective of the immiserated. In spite of the landowner's godlike omnipresence in El Olivo, his perspective is conspicuously absent from the novel, suggesting that entrapment within the present is the experience of a specific *class*, and not necessarily generalized to all sectors of society.

Also like Rulfo, Donoso evokes a present so stunted that it finds its ultimate metaphor in the afterlife. But if for Rulfo the immiserated present of the Mexican small peasantry was akin to purgatory, the inhabitants of Estación El Olivo are consigned to hell. This metaphor, embedded in the novel's title, is first revealed in the epigraph, taken from a conversation between Mephistopheles and Faust in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*:

> Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed
> In one self-place; for where we are is hell,
> And where hell is, there must we ever be. (5)

Here hell becomes the ultimate referent for a permanent, inescapable present that collapses boundaries of time and space. While this metaphor impinges far less on Donoso's narrative apparatus than it does on Rulfo's (Comala becomes an actual land of the living dead, whereas El Olivo remains embedded in the world of the living), it nonetheless looms over the entire narrative from its position as an epigraph.

As does Rulfo's fiction, Donoso's novel reveals that this hellish present is not itself timeless, much less the remainder of a "traditional" society. Instead, it is the recent creation of a peripheral capitalist modernity characterized by brutal forms of unevenness. As we learn from the musings

of La Japonesita, the continent-wide Pan-American Highway, inaugurated in Chile in 1963, had sliced through the countryside “straight as a knife” (50). It did so at a remove from Estación El Olivo, though, consigning the town to isolation and oblivion. As its name suggests, the town was built during the age of the railway to service Don Alejo’s estate, only to enter steep decline in the age of the automobile. The recentness of this decline is brought into even further relief through the narrative device that runs through anti-epics of rural immiseration: the kind of analepsis known as flashback. Turning to a moment twenty years earlier, sometime in the 1940s, and placed in the dead center of the novel (chapters 6 and 7 of the novel’s twelve), the flashback chapters narrate Manuela’s first arrival to Estación el Olivo by train, as a performer in a celebration held at the town brothel in honor of Don Alejo’s election to Congress. Over the course of the ensuing bacchanal, the assembled male guests give free rein to their repressed queer desires by accosting Manuela, eventually throwing her into a canal. When the men crudely joke about her large penis, Manuela retorts that the only thing it’s good for is urinating. The brothel’s madam, La Japonesa Grande, intimates to Don Alejo that *she* would be able to provoke an erection in Manuela. Don Alejo, his curiosity piqued, responds that he will give Japonesa anything if she succeeds in arousing Manuela, but—as a sign of his domineering role as landed patriarch—only if he can watch. La Japonesa agrees on the condition that he give her the brothel, a property his family has long owned. She then propositions La Manuela, promising to make her co-proprietor if they win the bet.

On a basic level, the narrative function of the flashback is to reveal a mystery at the center of the text: how La Manuela, a *loca*, became the father of La Japonesita (and by extension how La Japonesa Grande, dead at the novel’s beginning, became her mother); on a deeper level, though, its function is to reveal how a moment of relative social mobility in the recent past congealed into a stunted, seemingly eternal present. To be sure, the past evoked by the flashback is animated by the same structures of patriarchal control, misogyny, and homophobia that will culminate in La Manuela’s death twenty years later. At the same time, however, this moment is framed as promising upward mobility and hope for both Manuela and Japonesita as would-be property owners. La Japonesa Grande senses this new possibility when she asks herself: “How would it feel to be a proprietress, me the owner of this house where I started working as a girl” (96). Similarly, La

Manuela, reflecting on her itinerant life since being thrown out of her childhood home on a fundo for kissing a boy, muses “and that way, a proprietress, no one could throw her out, because the house would be hers. She could give orders” (100). Contradictorily, Don Alejo’s bet simultaneously confirms the landowner’s personalistic power over Manuela and Japonesa and, in the case they are successful, promises a new kind of freedom and autonomy through property ownership. Paradoxically perhaps, the brothel becomes the place where bourgeois desires for respectability and upward mobility are most strongly expressed in the novel. But it is not simply the prospect of owning the brothel—which, as Don Alejo admits, is worthless—that entices Japonesa and Manuela but owning it in a town poised on the cusp of a new era of prosperity. As Japonesa relates to Manuela, Don Alejo has grand plans to modernize El Olivo; as a first step, he plans to sell off parcels of his estate to townspeople: “He’s going to sell model homes, he says, with easy payments, and when he’s sold all the lots he’s going to have electricity brought to town and then we’ll be riding high for sure” (86). Later, Japonesa adds, the highway will pass “right by the door” (99). The plan attributed to Don Alejo, we will note, is highly speculative and lays out a wondrous scenario Manuela allows herself to indulge. As she decides to accept the bet, she thinks to herself: “Me, a proprietress. No one can throw me out, and if it’s true this town’s on its way up, maybe life won’t be so bad, and there’s hope even for an ugly fag like me” (101).

The flashback planted in the middle of *Hell Has No Limits* vividly contrasts a frozen diegetic present with a more promising past, the juxtaposition of which allows for a new reading of each. From the perspective of the past, we are able to sense movement beneath the still waters of the present; from the perspective of the diegetic present, we are able to sense the extent to which the promise of the past has evaporated: no electricity, no highway, no thriving town, just a brothel sinking into the ground. As I explore below, this interaction between a descriptive mode (ekphrasis) and a narrative mode (récit) expresses a wider historical movement: the destruction of small property owners in the uneven transition from a landowner road to a more anonymous, bourgeois agrarian capitalism.

This larger historical backdrop can be sensed when we consider how Don Alejo’s 1940s plan was at bottom an attempt at resolving the crisis of the

large estate. Through different details, we can gather that Don Alejo's family had been modernizing landowners during the golden era of wheat exports in the nineteenth century.[39] In one scene, for example, La Manuela comes across an abandoned threshing machine, described as "antediluvian" (19). With the crisis of wheat in the early twentieth century, landowners either turned toward speculation or began to produce crops for local consumption. Don Alejo's family made the transition to wine production, which as the historian José Bengoa notes, was the principal modernizing activity of the landed class at the beginning of the twentieth century, not for export but for a (weak) national market.[40] Don Alejo thus belongs to a long line of Chilean landowners whose modernizing zeal coexisted with—and was tempered by—their reliance on modes of coerced labor and rent extraction, the reform of which they vehemently opposed. After World War I, and especially after 1929, however, Chilean agriculture entered a long period of stagnation. Under the leadership of the anti-oligarchic Radical Party, which governed Chile throughout the 1940s, accumulation gravitated toward incipient national industry and state-led modernization projects including road building and electrification. In this broad context, Don Alejo's plan might be viewed as the landowner's response to the new developmentalist moment, in which he attempts to revive his stagnant estate through the creation of "model properties" in a newly created town. This amounts to a limited attempt at land reform initiated by the landowner himself. Even while recognizing that Don Alejo's plan aimed to create homes in a new town, and not parcels for cultivation, it resembles early models of Chilean land reform insofar as its cornerstone is the small property, and not something akin to the nationalized Mexican ejido, or, as in later land reforms in Latin America, the agrarian cooperative. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, against the backdrop of a rising organized left, oligarchs and bourgeois reformers placed emphasis on the creation of small-property owners as a hedge against radicalization.[41] In similar fashion, the Radical leader Pedro Aguirre Cerda wrote of the need to create a class of small proprietors as a solution to the country's agrarian problem.[42] As a notable literary counterpart, the Noble Prize–winning poet Gabriela Mistral (to whom Aguirre Cerda dedicated an essay on the agrarian question) celebrated the creation of new smallholders in *Poema de Chile*: "Juan

Labrador" (Juan the Farmhand) would be able to secure an orchard of his own (*huerto suyo*).[43]

Don Alejo's plan to "parcel" his estate in the 1940s evokes a similar ideal of the bourgeois smallholding, and as such promises newfound mobility to a sex worker and an itinerant *loca* performer. The diegetic present, however, reveals the cruel evaporation of this promise into a state akin to hell. What has happened to produce this disillusion? At bottom, the smallholder model initiated by Don Alejo has been a temporary deviation; the lasting transition underway is that of a landowner road to full-blown agrarian capitalism poised to annihilate the newly created smallholders. As the narrative tension builds to culminate in the horrific beating of Manuela by Octavio and Pancho, we are given a glimpse of the *end* of a landowner road, and what it means for the precarious class of smallholders it has created. Toward the end of the novel, we learn of a new plan hatched by Don Alejo: to buy back the properties he had parceled out twenty years earlier, including the brothel, to reconstitute his estate prior to his approaching death. As in the 1940s flashback, this plan is not articulated directly by Don Alejo but grasped through the perceptions of the immiserated main characters: Manuela, for example, registers that Don Alejo has been offering to buy his former servant Ludovina's house and tries to convince Japonesita to sell the brothel so that they can move to Talca, a proposal she refuses. Pancho's brother-in-law Octavio, perhaps with the clarity available to an outsider, speculates that Don Alejo plans to

> tear down the houses and plow the town, rich, fallow land, and plant vineyards as if the town had never existed, hell, that's what he's after. Now that his plans for making Estación el Olivo an important town have fallen through, because he thought the highway would come right by his door. (117)

If the plan described in the flashback from the 1940s marked a move toward smallholdings, the current plan marks a reconsolidation of property into the hands of the landowner. Moreover, if the 1940s plan envisioned a modernized town, the current plan plows that land back into agricultural production.

Crucially, however, the novel suggests that the reconsolidation of Don Alejo's estate is not simply a reversion to an earlier landowner-driven model. A previous parceling routed through smallholders makes reconcentration possible on a higher ground. It is not too difficult to sense

that a reorganization of property will most likely occur not in the form of old-school latifundios or smallholdings, but under the impersonal structure of capital. This structure is already grasped, darkly, in Japonesita's description of El Olivo early in the novel as "nothing but a few run-down houses scattered by the geometry of vineyards which seem on the verge of swallowing them" (52). Against a background of decline, the geometric vineyards represent the only possible vector of accumulation in the town. Again, however, this is unlikely to occur along the old lines of the landowner: Don Alejo is dying and has no heirs, and it is unclear who might come to own the reconstituted estate. This is, perhaps, precisely the point: Someone from outside of the purview of the novel's representational apparatus will oversee the expansion of the vineyards in a new moment. In the meantime, the inauguration of this new phase spells nothing but disaster for smallholders like Manuela. Her beating crystallizes the destructive forces unleashed by the transition. Once protected by Don Alejo, his waning authority creates the opening for Pancho and Octavio to beat and most likely kill her, in a grotesque performance of masculine autonomy from the landowner. As she is beaten, she tries in vain to cross over into Alejo's estate. But at this moment in history, no protection is forthcoming. Don Alejo's fierce guard dogs bark, but in the distance; consonant with the emergent social logic, however, what happens beyond the estate's fences is none of their concern. The old patriarchal regime is oppressive, but the novel intimates that what replaces it might be even worse, leaving people like Manuela to fend for themselves in a system indifferent to their very existence.

In one sense, the transition *Hell Has No Limits* alludes to runs counter to contemporary Chilean history. Just a year after the novel's publication, in 1967, the Chilean state would initiate a land reform project that by 1970 would expropriate and redistribute 60 percent of the country's arable land to peasants.[44] In this first phase of land reform, the Christian Democrat government of Eduardo Frei Montalva pursued policies consonant with the goals of the US-sponsored Alliance for Progress launched by the John F. Kennedy administration in 1961. Land reform was a key goal of this international development program, as a means of both modernizing stagnant and underperforming agriculture and warding off the possibility of socialist revolution in Latin America. In Chile, the Frei reforms essentially eliminated the latifundio, replacing it with smallholdings and cooperatives.

Between 1970 and 1973, the socialist Popular Unity government led by Salvador Allende further accelerated land reform in concert with the demands of a militant, organized peasantry. Donoso's novel can't seem to sense the basic contours of this oncoming historical change. Instead, he consigns a small-scale, landowner-directed land reform to the past, and envisions a future of capitalist agriculture unimpeded by any serious form of resistance.

But what constitutes a failure of the novel's historical imagination in one moment becomes a source of insight in the next. The US-sponsored military coup that ended the Popular Unity government in 1973 marked an abrupt end to land reform in Chile. Under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, the smallholdings created by land reform reverted back into large properties. The form these properties took, however, was not that of the latifundios of the past, with their resident landowners and *inquilinos*, but highly capitalized farms operated by business groups and employing wage labor.[45] At the same time, agricultural production gravitated away from the domestic market that land reform was supposed to dynamize and back toward the world market: Chilean wine, which rose to global prominence in the 1990s, is a case in point. And though *Hell Has No Limits* couldn't possibly envision the full contours of this transition, it is nonetheless strangely proleptic in imagining a definitive end to a Chilean smallholder road through the arrival of a more impersonal—but no less brutal—system of capitalist agriculture. To return to the novel's title, the novel gestures toward the historical limits of smallholder autonomy to produce a sense of finality with respect to this road. This is perhaps why for Donoso the chief metaphor for El Olivo, from the perspective of the immiserated smallholder, is not that of purgatory, as it was for Rulfo, but hell.

Read today, Rulfo and Donoso's works allow us to reconstruct elements of a historical transition just beneath the surface of an apparent stasis. In doing so, they call attention to the transitional character of peasant roads to capitalism themselves, which in Latin America would not last beyond the twentieth century. From the vantage point of capital, at least, once the goal of eliminating the latifundio was accomplished, measures like land reform were no longer necessary, and reconcentration could take place on a higher, capitalist plane. In hindsight, then, the sense of immobility generated by anti-epics of rural immiseration was, paradoxically enough, temporary in nature. For the most part, the rural worlds depicted by Rulfo and Donoso no

longer exist today, either in the form of the latifundio or smallholders, suggesting that if in one moment agrarian transition might only be perceived as unending, in another it might be apprehended as having reached a real conclusion, at least until further notice. But historical processes did not stop, nor did the contradictions they produced; twentieth-century literature, in turn, continued to map agrarian transitions as momentous, world-altering events. In order to appreciate the full sweep of these transitions, however, novels had to turn to a rather different setting: the burgeoning cities that emerged across Latin America from the ashes of the old rural order.

III

Capitalism

5

What Are Cities Made Of? The Boom's Vanishing Agrarian Mediators

We have … to look, in country and city alike, at the real social processes of alienation, separation, externality, abstraction.

Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*

Forms of Separation

The previous chapter examined literary answers to the question of how long the peasantry could last under conditions of ever-increasing immiseration, in a context in which smallholding peasants or newly minted rural bourgeois were subjected to market forces. As we saw in fiction by Juan Rulfo, the alternate preservation and dissolution of the peasantry under Mexican land reform was so protracted that it appeared as an unending state of purgatory. But as José Donoso's *Hell Has No Limits* revealed, this purgatorial existence did indeed have material limits, beyond which the continued existence of smallholders became unsustainable within a new phase of capitalist agriculture. The present chapter turns to ask what happened after such moments, when latifundia had been either destroyed or disintegrated, and smallholders who could no longer sustain themselves with the meager resources afforded them were drawn to cities. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, an exodus from the countryside propelled

Latin American cities to become some of the largest on earth: The population of Mexico City, for example, expanded from 3.3 million in 1950 to 8 million in 1970 and 13 million in 1980 (today it stands at 24 million). Megacities like São Paulo tell a similar story, as do relatively smaller ones like Lima. With this expansion, skyscrapers, apartment blocks, and industrial corridors remade the urban landscape—as did, inevitably, slums so large they constituted cities unto themselves. As part of this overall movement, the agrarian novel followed rural migrants to the city to pose a new, and perhaps final, articulation of the classic agrarian question: What are cities made of?

In some sense, every city in the capitalist era is the product of an agrarian transition. This is as true of nineteenth-century London or Manchester as it is true of contemporary Delhi or Shanghai. The "liberation" of labor from the countryside is a precondition for industry; on a more fundamental level, the separations presupposed by and necessary to the capitalist mode of production—that of people from subsistence, of use from exchange value, of concrete from abstract labor—are coextensive with the geographical separation of town and country. In some sense, the novel itself is a product of such separations, historically sedimented and refracted through aesthetic form. As I have explored throughout this book, the twentieth-century Latin American novel provides its own history of separation, apprehended from the vantage point of the countryside. Of course, neither the city nor the novel was new in the twentieth century. The Latin American city had been a center of cultural, political, and economic power since the colonial period; the novel, born in those cities in the nineteenth century, had long explored different aspects of urban life. But it was only in the 1960s, in the wake of the epochal transitions traced by the twentieth-century agrarian novel, that a new kind of city—fully capitalist in character—emerged, and, with it, a new kind of novel.

As a guide to the novel's exploration of this new kind of city, I turn to three famous experimental novels written in the 1960s: Carlos Fuentes's *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (*The Death of Artemio Cruz*, 1962), José Donoso's *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (*The Obscene Bird of Night*, 1970), and José María Arguedas's *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* (*The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below*, 1971, posthumous). Each of these novels takes place in a city: Mexico City, Mexico; Santiago, Chile; and Chimbote, Peru, respectively. At the same time, though, this urban setting

becomes a vantage point for understanding a much longer history of agrarian transformation. This history is evoked, paradoxically enough, by way of a formal principle of separation. Each of the three novels is organized around a split, an internally divided narrative perspective that bridges the passage from rural to urban society. In Fuentes's novel, Artemio Cruz's internally divided self tells a story that stretches from the Porfirian-era hacienda and its destruction in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution to the consolidation of an industrial, urban-based capitalism. In Donoso's novel, the psychosis of the first-person narrator is inextricably bound to a story that runs from the consolidation of the Chilean latifundio in the eighteenth century through its decadence in the early twentieth century, and to final death throes in the 1960s with state-mandated land reform and industrialization. And in Arguedas's novel, a set of first-person authorial diaries breaks off from narrative chapters altogether, an arrangement that brings into view a longer history of indigenous communal breakdown in the industrial city. Each of these novels, in its own way, proceeds from a position of internal separation, only to suture the resulting fragments into something resembling totality.

This tension between principles of fragmentation and totalization is a feature widely associated with modernism, and, in Latin America, the variant of modernism practiced by members of the world-famous Latin American boom generation of the 1960s. Earlier Latin American modernisms, to be sure, had already initiated a search for aesthetic forms able to capture the brutally unequal contours of the Latin American city in relation to the countryside.[1] What was uniquely available to authors in the 1960s, though, was the wide arc of transition stretching from the collapse of rural-agrarian society and emergence of cities that were becoming home, for the first time in history, to the majority of the region's population. The simultaneously fragmented and totalizing aesthetic associated with the boom emerged at least in part as a means of making that transition legible.

As a literary formation, the boom is often identified with a set of marquee authors who came to global prominence with novels published by presses in Spain. Two of the authors studied in this chapter, Fuentes and Donoso, are considered its founding members, along with Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez, and Mario Vargas Llosa. Arguedas, who hailed from an older generation of realist writers, was decidedly not part of this formation. The extreme experimentalism of Arguedas's final novel,

however, allows us to posit new understandings of boom-era aesthetics, not based on clubbish affinity or international sales numbers, but by way of an expanded inquiry into the aesthetic forms generated by historical transition.

In broad terms, the boom has been understood in one of two ways: as a publishing phenomenon in relation to expanding literary markets and professionalization; or, alternatively, as a contradictory expression of the utopian impulses born of the Cuban Revolution.[2] Both of these interpretations are wholly valid and complement one another. Indeed, extrapolating from Fredric Jameson's "Periodizing the 60s," this decade was marked at once by the expansion of revolutionary energies *and* the consolidation of capitalism around the world. Importantly, for Jameson, in Latin America and other regions of what was then known as the Third World, this dialectic played itself out most dramatically in relation to the countryside, as the possibility of socialist revolution was countered by the ongoing "green" (capitalist) one in agriculture.[3] In Latin America, the 1960s marked the high point of revolutionary utopianism, at the same time as it marked, as Alain de Janvry has noted, the first time in history that the capitalist mode of production came to define *all* aspects of agrarian society, "including that of peasants."[4] Given these coordinates, we might reconsider the boom as pioneering an aesthetic that gave expression to the 1960s not only as a decade of transition writ large, but, more specifically, as one of far-reaching agrarian transition.[5]

Such a reframing might certainly route itself through the most famous boom novel of them all, Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which recounts the rise and decline of the rural town of Macondo in moments stretching from the arrival of gypsies bearing marvelous inventions to the incursion of a foreign banana company. This novel, though, is very different from the ones studied in this chapter insofar as it famously employs a single, unified narrative perspective to evoke the social world of Macondo: Rich and poor, old and young are all captured by the same voice.[6] The novels by Fuentes, Donoso, and Arguedas examined in this chapter, by contrast, are less well known outside Latin America, but are perhaps more representative in their recourse to irremediably fragmented—and at times openly schizoid—perspectives. Without considering whether a unified perspective is ever plausible in highly stratified rural societies, we can see that such a perspective becomes impossible in the city. In the urban

novels discussed in this chapter, something fundamental has been broken; whichever new unities were being born in the city must be contemplated from that standpoint, as a separation in unity.[7]

What ultimately marks this trio of novels as transitional, though, is the fact that their epochal powers of projection reach their maximum expression at the very moment they are waning. It is not coincidental, in this regard, that all three novels are organized around the deaths of individuals or classes: the death of a capitalist (Artemio Cruz) with rural origins in Fuentes's *The Death of Artemio Cruz*; the termination of an oligarchic family line in *The Obscene Bird of Night*, together with the mental and bodily destruction of the psychotic middle-class narrator; and the dissolution of Andean indigenous communities in *The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below*, complemented by the author's own suicide. In this way, the agrarian world announces itself as a vanishing mediator of sorts, one that would become increasingly unavailable to later fiction. And indeed, as a manner of periodizing across this trio of novels, each reveals a progressive exhaustion of the experimental modes they employ to signal a possible end to the Latin American novel's ability to evoke agrarian transition. In what follows, I chart that formal exhaustion, together with the startling insights it provides into the new social forms animating the city, particularly those pertaining to the antagonism between capital, on the one side, and (surplus) labor, on the other.

A Mexican Trinity Formula

As a self-proclaimed founder and booster of the 1960s Latin American boom, the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes provides a key entry point into the contradictions and ambiguities of this formation. To begin, we can note that Fuentes clearly viewed it as a "revolutionary" literary current, though, in keeping with the nebulous and uncertain terrain of the 1960s, this term carried different and competing meanings. At times, as is well known, this meant socialist revolution; as José Donoso recalls, Fuentes proclaimed adhesion to the Cuban Revolution as the sine qua non of the new literary movement.[8] At other times, however, it referred to the rapid changes experienced by peripheral societies themselves, as when Fuentes, in an interview, heralded the new consumption habits made possible by the

expansion of the domestic market: “The entry of a good third of Mexicans into the world of consumption is a fact that we cannot ignore and that offers an extraordinary opportunity: that of *revolutionizing* … consumer society in Mexico.”[9] These are, of course, quite different political visions; for the moment, though, I want to note that both socialist revolution *and* national capitalist development offered a utopian horizon marked by a strong sense of historical movement. It is not difficult to understand, from here, why members of the boom became so preoccupied with evoking large-scale historical transitions. In a book on the Latin American “new narrative,” Fuentes maintained that the long history of dependent capitalism and “semi-feudalism” had rendered the novel a “static form in a static society.”[10] The possibility of national development and/or socialist revolution that reached its high point in the 1960s, however, made possible what the author viewed as more dynamic, inventive, and indeed revolutionary forms of expression.

After the more than a half-century of counterrevolution and de-development that followed the tumult of the 1960s, the boom’s faith in historical movement deserves attention, not so much to mourn lost potential or remonstrate against possible naïveté, but to mark its historical features. For, when read today, what is most striking about the novels of the 1960s is not only their experimental style (which we might name a kind of high modernism with counterparts in artistic and architectural movements in mid-twentieth-century Latin America), but their attempt to evoke epochal transitions and, chief among them, agrarian transitions.

The clearest, cleanest, and earliest example of just such an attempt can be found in Fuentes’s *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (hereafter *Artemio Cruz*), a novel that recounts, in jumbled order, the life and death of a Mexico City capitalist. The novel’s most oft-commented feature is its tripartite narrative perspective, repeated in the same order throughout the novel: a first-person “I” who relates, in the diegetic present of 1959, the deathbed musings of the protagonist, as he partially registers the chattering of family members and business associates in his hospital room; a second-person “you” who recalls, in an oneiric vein, his regrets and repressed desires in the future tense; and, in what are by far the longest sections of the novel, a third-person voice that narrates, in jumbled order, single days in the life of Artemio Cruz (“he”) in the past tense. These include, for example, June 6, 1941, in a rapidly industrializing Mexico City, as he negotiates with US investors over a mine; May 20, 1919, in rural Puebla in the waning days of

the revolution, as he cheats peasants out of irrigated land while simultaneously ruining competing landowners; December 4, 1913, as he accidentally rises in ranks of the revolutionary forces while Regina, the one woman he truly loved (but also raped), is killed by *federales*; and so on, until the novel concludes, just before his death, to recount his birth in 1886 on an estate in rural Veracruz. The "he" portions of *Artemio Cruz* are in essence flashbacks whose main function is to narrate the episodes that culminate in a present in which Artemio Cruz agonizes on his deathbed. We have already seen something like this structure in the previous chapter's consideration of what I called an anti-epic of rural immiseration, wherein the origins of a concentrated, futureless present were revealed in a more dynamic past. *Artemio Cruz* proceeds in broadly similar fashion, but with two key differences: First, whereas in anti-epics of immiseration the futureless present was narrated from the point of view of doomed peasants, Fuentes's novel is narrated from the perspective of a single, dying capitalist. Fuentes, the son of a diplomat, knew this bourgeois milieu well and nearly always routed his inquiries into Mexican society though its most elite sectors.[11] Second, whereas anti-epics of immiseration limited their purview to a dying rural-agrarian order, Fuentes's novel, like the other novels discussed in this chapter, track how this order gave birth to a new but no less unequal urban-industrial one.

The contours of this sweeping transition are not immediately visible. The alternating "I," "you," and "he" sections reveal an internally riven consciousness whose main characteristic is its alienation from both itself and others. In like manner, the flashback episodes initially disorient the reader with their out-of-sequence character. And yet the novel's self-consciously fragmented structure is part of what is in fact a quite coherent whole whose function is to outline a massive transition that stretches from the agrarian world of the Porfirian hacienda and its destruction by the Mexican Revolution to the consolidation of a post-revolution urban-industrial order and—if we count the novel's postscript from Havana among these historical markers—an as-yet-unrealized socialist revolution. In formal terms, this interplay between subjective fragmentation and historical totalization reveals the textual edifice of *Artemio Cruz* as divided against itself, into equally compelling modernist and realist modes. We might say, as Paul Stasi has argued in an Anglophone context, that Fuentes's novel is a deeply modernist text that keeps realism alive within its

fragments.[12] Against the grain of Fuentes's own disparaging of previous Latin American realist currents as outmoded, the narrative chapters that compose the majority of *Artemio Cruz* can easily be associated with the historical novel, in both its Balzacian treatment of the ambitious parvenu (not for nothing Elena Poniatowska called Fuentes "our Mexican Balzac"). More concretely, this lineage is revealed by Fuentes's overt citation of the so-called "novel of the Mexican Revolution," whose emergence with Azuela marked, as argued in chapter 3, a signal moment of realist practice in Latin America.[13] And yet, conversely, Fuentes's novel is not wholly realist, either. Instead, it is a novel that self-consciously punctures forward-moving linearity and narrative objectivity for a structure that turns in on itself through out-of-sequence events and subjective splintering.

The question, though, is why, beyond literary fashion, Fuentes's novel can't be a realist historical novel, and, conversely, why it can't fully abandon realism, either. As a provisional answer, I suggest that Fuentes's novel offers itself as a kind of laboratory for understanding how realism dissolves into modernism, but also how modernism reinstates totality by other means, as a means of evoking a completed historical transition. For in *Artemio Cruz*, modernist fragmentation announces itself as the direct outcome of a previous historical moment. As an initial example, we can turn to a key passage in the first "he" fragment, set in 1941, near the beginning of a key phase of Mexican industrialization. In it, Artemio Cruz exits his chauffeured vehicle to enter a chaotic street scene in the center of Mexico City:

> The limousine stopped at the corner of Isabel la Católica, and the chauffeur opened the door, doffing his hat, while he, on the other hand, put on his own, pushing back the strands of hair around his temples which had escaped the hat, and the court of lottery-ticket vendors, shoe-shine boys, women wrapped in rebozos, and children with snot-encrusted upper lips surrounded him until he passed through the revolving doors and stopped to adjust his tie in front of the vestibule window, and farther along, in the second window, which faced Calle Madero, a man identical to himself, but far away, adjusted the knot of his tie at the same time, with the same nicotine-stained fingers, the same double-breasted suit, but without color, surrounded by beggars, and dropped his hand at the same time that he did and then turned his back on him and walked toward the middle of the street, while he, on the other hand, looked for the elevator, disoriented for an instant.[14]

The doubling that the novel performs ceaselessly by way of a tripartite narrative structure is condensed here in the space of a single sentence: Artemio Cruz is a man estranged from himself and others, a situation rooted

in concrete social coordinates. The passage begins as a more-or-less realist evocation of an urban landscape, in which a capitalist exits the protective shell of his car and passes through a phalanx of street vendors and beggars but quickly gives way to recognizably modernist images of doubling. The momentary transit of a capitalist through a space of immiseration disorients him; the gleaming surfaces of private property, in turn, cause his image to become splintered and thrown back into the crowd of beggars. On one level, this doubling expresses the vast gulf separating rich and poor in the peripheral metropolis, which itself bears the traces of a recent transition. The woman's rebozo (shawl) reveals her rural origins, just as the mere preponderance of underemployed surplus labor in the form of lottery ticket sellers and shoe shiners attests to a recent exodus from the countryside. The peripheral capitalist is, in this regard, not just momentarily, but structurally, "surrounded by beggars."

On a deeper level, though, Artemio Cruz's doubled reflection has to do with his own suppressed rural origins. As we learn in the novel's final two chapters, he was born on an estate in rural Veracruz, as the illegitimate son of an Afro-descended (*mulata* in the novel) mother raped by a white landowner. Growing up on a corner of a decadent estate, Artemio spent his days fishing with his beloved Uncle Lunero. Once Lunero was pressed into another landowner's service, Artemio was violently separated from him and ejected from the closed world he had known. In the moment Artemio is about to lose his uncle forever, he feels rage, "because now he knew that life had enemies and that it was not any longer the uninterrupted flow of river and work; rage because now he would know separation" (296). Pavel Andrade has provided an excellent reading of this passage as revealing a concrete episode of original accumulation as the historical bedrock for the novel's internally divided aesthetic. Separation becomes the "master code that defines the novel's spatial logic" as its action moves between a hacienda economy in Veracruz to an industrial one in Mexico City.[15] I would add that these final chapters reveal an episode of rural dispossession as the (realist) origin of a (modernist) split consciousness, at the same time as their inclusion at the tail end of the novel functions to reintegrate the separated pieces into the larger whole that is the novel. With this organization, we catch a glimpse of the origins of a Mexico City capitalist in the Porfirian-era hacienda, but also those of the street hawkers and beggars we encounter in the street scene in the chapter from 1941. The

structure of the novel broadly resembles, in this sense, that of Marx's *Capital*, which begins with a consolidated commodity order and ends with a historical account of the forceful separation of people from land and community that brought that order into being. As a work of realism, the novel identifies the specificity of these historic processes in their specifically Mexican guise; as a work of modernism, the novel reveals how those processes result in a split individual consciousness. To return to the 1941 street scene, the origins of this splintering have become "colorless," much like Artemio Cruz's suppressed racial origins, even as his hands remained "stained" by tobacco, in a possible reference to the commodity produced on the estate. The novel as a whole, however, insists upon making these origins visible again. In similar manner, the end of the novel allows us to comprehend that the capitalist's disorientation at seeing his reflection thrown back into a crowd of beggars is not coincidental; this might have easily been his own fate.

The only reason this was *not* Artemio's fate was because his own freedom from the hacienda accidentally and powerfully coalesced with that of millions in the form of the Mexican Revolution. In any other Latin American context, a man freed or expelled from a hacienda in 1903 most likely would have become a smallholding peasant, itinerant laborer, or semi-employed urban proletarian. The revolution, however, combined with a bit of luck, allows Artemio Cruz to radically alter his class destiny. As explored in chapter 3, the liberation of popular energies by way of the Mexican Revolution sparked a new realist practice, one I identified as a homegrown version of the historical novel. In line with Lukács's analysis of this form, Azuela's *Los de abajo* revealed the defeat of popular peasant aims by bourgeois ones, and with it the survival of individual opportunists. Notably, for all of Fuentes's railing against earlier Latin American realist traditions, he made an exception for the novel of the Mexican Revolution's examination of "ambiguity," by which he might very well have meant novels' unsparing depiction of the revolution's more unsavory characters, chief among them members of the Mexican bourgeoisie.[16] Fuentes's *Artemio Cruz*, which might well be the last great novel of the Mexican Revolution, continues to examine how opportunists take advantage of the chaos of armed struggle. While these opportunists were most often bourgeois, revolutionary upheaval allowed individual peasants to occupy this role as well. This is a theme that evidently fascinated Fuentes: In an

earlier work, *La región más transparente* (*Where the Air Is Clear*, 1958), the revolution allows a bonded peasant to become a powerful Mexico City banker in its aftermath. In this novel, though, the banker is but one character in a crowded urban tableau. *Artemio Cruz* repeats the same motif but gains a greater degree of control and dramatic concentration by focusing on a single character whose personal trajectory maps the death of the old agrarian order and birth of a new urban and bourgeois one.

This trajectory becomes startlingly clear when we reassemble a set of episodes, from 1913, 1915, and 1919, respectively. In the 1913 episode, eleven years after being expelled from the hacienda in Veracruz, Cruz has joined the revolutionary cause and fights against the *federales* in Sonora. Two narrative clusters anchor this chapter. The first is a relationship with a woman, Regina, that promises to reunite the sundered parts of himself: "The walls of separation had fallen; now they were two in one" (70). This projected unity is dashed when Regina is killed, but also when Artemio reveals that their relationship originated in rape. Second, in a manner that will persist throughout the narrative, the failure of human connection is countered with individual success: In this case, he is heralded as a war hero in a battle he didn't fight, permitting his ascendancy in the ranks.

Solitary advancement through sheer luck continues in the longest of the revolutionary episodes, set in the pivotal year of 1915, near the end of the factional war between the popular armies of Pancho Villa and the Constitutionalist (bourgeois) armies of Álvaro Obregón and Venustiano Carranza. This episode, one critic notes, constitutes "the centre of balance of the whole work," both because it appears at its midpoint (much in the way Rulfo's story "The Burning Plain" appears in the center of his eponymously titled collection), but also because it marks the true turning point in Artemio Cruz's life.[17] We find Cruz fighting in Chihuahua on the side of Álvaro Obregón, as befits his status as a parvenu.[18] Even though Pancho Villa's popular forces have already been defeated, he is captured by a Villista battalion and put into a jail cell to await execution with his comrade-in-arms Tobías, a Yaqui indigenous man with his own story of dispossession by landowners, and an upper-class stranger, Gonzalo Bernal. Bernal, a messenger for Carranza's army, is the son of a landowner in Puebla who has renounced his own class destiny to fight in the revolution. As the three men sit in the cell, Bernal recounts his background and disillusionment with the revolution. Bristling at Bernal's populist hauteur,

Artemio refuses to share his own story. As luck would have it, the Villista commander orders Tobías and Gonzalo's execution, while Artemio is saved by the sudden arrival of the Constitutionalist troops. Immediately before being captured, while trapped in a mine shaft, Artemio had entertained the prospect of becoming a small farmer if he survived the war; even earlier, in 1913, he had participated in impromptu land redistributions among peasants in Sonora. After meeting Bernal, however, the accidental encounter permitted by the revolution creates a starkly different possibility: occupying the dead man's evacuated place in society as a man of *property*.

The narrative episode of 1919 seals this ascent. It places Cruz in the Bernal mansion in Puebla, to which he gains admission because he brings news of the first-born son's last hours in the Villista jail. With this episode, Artemio's accidental encounter in 1915 takes on the contours of the inevitable: Bernal's father recognizes in Artemio an ally in the unstable post-revolution moment and marries him to his daughter Catalina, with whom he will share a loveless marriage until his death. This transfer of power transmits key details about the emergent post-revolutionary landscape. As the administrator of Bernal's properties, Artemio outflanks older Porfirian-era landowners while at the same time cheating peasants out of land promised to them by the revolution. Sensing possibilities for urban growth, he begins to acquire lands outside Puebla. This anticipates, in turn, his acquisition of lands outside Mexico City in 1927 in exchange for his alliance with President Plutarco Elías Calles, founder of the political party that would rule Mexico for seventy-one years. A revolution in property relations can be glimpsed here, as the landowner no longer extracts surpluses through his reliance on land monopoly but by leasing to others; in technical terms, absolute rent (the bane of the latifundio) gives way to differential rent. There are many more details that indicate the novel's close attention to the transition from an older model of accumulation to a new one. Here, though, I only wish to highlight how the chaotic and freeing impulses of the revolution allowed a dispossessed peasant from Veracruz to become an agent of that very dispossession and, in the process, a personification of capital itself. In formal terms, Cruz's rise reveals its hidden origins in a twist of fate permitted by revolution; likewise, urban accumulation reveals its immediate origins in the capitalist reorganization of the countryside.

The realist episodes clustered around the revolution and its immediate aftermath, in turn, provide fresh ground for understanding Artemio Cruz's split perspective. For if on the one side he is painfully separated from his cohesive existence in Veracruz and, later, barred from the possibility of reconstitution with Regina, on the other side he becomes a double for another man: "He was entering doubled, with Gonzalo Bernal's life added onto his, as if Bernal in dying had delegated the possibilities of his unfulfilled life to him" (38). In this manner, Artemio Cruz severs and accumulates selves just as he severs and accumulates landholdings, shares, and businesses. From milling corn, he proceeds to real estate, from real estate to mines, newspapers, and hotels, and so on, in a manner consonant with the coalescing of a project of national industrialization by the mid-twentieth century. This process of liquidating and accumulating continues, ad nauseam, for the rest of Artemio Cruz's life, to result in the three selves expressed in the novel. As the "I" muses in a deathbed delirium: "I don't know … I don't know … if I am he … if you were he … if I am the three …" (306). While the most frequent manner of approaching Artemio Cruz's alienation from himself is by way of abstract narratives such as the "betrayal of the ideals of the Revolution," it might more compellingly be understood, to my mind, as personifying the process of splitting and recombination at the heart of the accumulation of capital. On the one hand, the lineaments of this process are distinctly national, as he is an avatar for a new national bourgeoisie during the period of Mexican industrialization that stretches from the 1940s through the 1960s. On the other hand, there is something in the ceaseless and relentless energy of capital as a social force that far exceeds these national markers. And indeed, I would venture that the novel's three-part narrative structure (I-you-he) bears some resemblance to the "trinity formula" identified by Marx, composed of rent, wages, and profits on capital, insofar as both operate as internally differentiated aspects within a larger whole. To view Artemio Cruz as a personification of the trinity formula is to recognize his importance as an individual agent, but also as a mere conduit for the impersonal and automatic social force of capital.[19] In the novel's final "you" section, the perspective seems to invoke this automaticity by noting that Artemio was "liberated from the fatality of a single place and birth" only to become "enslaved to another destiny, a new unknown destiny" (300). For all his power, he cannot escape this new, unknown destiny until he dies. The trinity formula he personifies, however,

will continue to reproduce itself through new conduits; his secretary Padilla, for example, is a likely candidate for this role. It is highly likely, however, that the concrete historical processes of separation experienced by Artemio Cruz will become increasingly invisible within the automatic and abstract system to which those processes gave rise. Artemio Cruz's history, in other words, dies with him; as a corollary, the novel seems to admit that its capacity to evoke transition might itself be on the wane.

For in the end, what *Artemio Cruz* gives us is a vision of how the jagged shards of historical experience are settling into a consolidated and self-reproducing system. This understanding is, once again, best expressed on the level of aesthetic form. As I argued above, a realist impulse stages the dissolution of a unitary self into multiple, internally riven perspectives and memories to create modernist doublings, estrangements, and fragments. Realism is operative, but self-consciously in tatters. And so, it is left to a modernism that emerges from the ruins of realism to reunite jagged shards of self and experience into a meticulously crafted and smooth artistic structure. Fuentes's insistence on structure is indeed one of the most recognized aspects of the novel, especially via the regular repetition of the "I-you-he" fragments. If Azuela displayed what one critic called "mathematical" precision as a realist, Fuentes achieves something similar as a "new novelist." In keeping with contemporary suspicion of *grands récits*, we might view Fuentes's commitment to a totalizing apparatus as artificial or even authoritarian (as indeed many recent critics have done). But, approached historically, it might alert us to something different: a settling into place of a pattern or structure, that of capital accumulation in the aftermath of a largely completed agrarian transition. If the realist fragments of the novel alert us to the historical moorings of this pattern, the regularly recurring I-you-he structure points toward its automaticity in the present. Moving forward, we might gather that the automaticity will remain in place, while its visible historical markers recede.

And it is here that we can return to the ambiguous idea of revolution in Fuentes's novel. As is often noted, *Artemio Cruz* ends with a postscript dated Havana, May 1960, and Mexico, December 1961, transmitting the sense that the popular revolution of 1910 might only be redeemed by a *socialist* revolution like the one that had occurred in Cuba. Without minimizing the utopian appeal to the Cuban Revolution as a horizon for liberation in the 1960s, it its noteworthy that it can only be alluded to in the

form of an epigraph, outside a text that has unfolded to reveal the assuredness that an alliance between capital and state has succeeded in thwarting further revolutionary movements in Mexico. Perhaps too pessimistically, everything except the postscript in Fuentes's novel seems to point to the foreclosure of a new revolutionary cycle in Mexico, barring some as-yet-unimagined interruption of the trinity formula that has reorganized social life.

Servitude's Obscene Remains

Fuentes's *Artemio Cruz* calls our attention to historic processes of separation in such a way as to create a reconstituted whole: From fragments, we can reconstruct the birth, life, and death of Artemio Cruz in line with concrete historical periods ranging from the *Porfiriato* and revolution through the consolidation of industrial capitalism in the 1940s and 1950s. Viewed from this angle, there is something clean, even surgical, about Artemio's internally divided perspective, which perhaps marks the transition he personifies as complete. No such cordon sanitaire exists between past and present, however, in José Donoso's *Obscene Bird of Night* (hereafter *Obscene Bird*), the monstrous 500-page masterpiece the author spent the better part of the 1960s writing and rewriting. In the previous chapter, I read the author's previous novel, *Hell Has No Limits,* as marking the end of a smallholder road and the birth of a new capitalist logic in the countryside. *Obscene Bird* extends this analysis by taking it to a different setting—the city—and by vastly extending the reach of the historical narrative, from the rise of the latifundio in the eighteenth century to its collapse in the 1960s. As an index of this collapse, *Obscene Bird* stretches the form of the novel, and the principle of narration embedded within it, to new limits. The novel's title, as revealed in an epigraph, is taken from a letter by Henry James to his sons, in which the author characterizes life as emerging from the "profoundest tragic depths of the essential dearth in which its subject's roots are plunged. The natural inheritance of everyone who is capable of spiritual life is an unsubdued forest where the wolf howls and the obscene bird of night chatters" (vi). In line with this epigraph, the novel is narrated by a subject so defined by lack that his obscene chattering seems to break completely with reality. This first-person narrator, who goes

by the name Mudito (literally, the little mute one), is an indigent living in a crumbling Santiago convent owned by the powerful Azcoitía clan. In the present, the convent is used to house aging female servants of the landed class, who, as Mudito describes, rattle around its labyrinthine passages, knitting ever-tinier clothes for heirs that will never be born, and packaging the detritus of their former lives into tiny bundles they store under their beds. Such decay finds its formal counterpart in Mudito's self-consciously neutered voice, as he delivers a silent monologue to the convent's mother superior, Madre Benita. His evocation of the tiny, useless packages the old women ceaselessly wrap, for example, might as well be a description of his own consciousness:

> Everything you find is tied, packaged, wrapped in something, inside something else—tattered clothing wrapped in itself, broken objects that crumble as you unwrap them, the porcelain handle of a demitasse, ribbons from a First Communion sash, things saved for the sake of saving, packing, tying, preserving this static, reiterative community that never lets you in on its secret, Madre Benita.[20]

Mudito's narrative voice mimics this packaging, in that it obsessively orders and reorders the cast-off remnants of a patriarchal world on the verge of disappearance. The old women keep memories of their servitude alive under their beds, while Mudito relates them in a silent voice. As we can already sense in these diminished possibilities for acting and speaking, the packages kept inside the convent are not long for this world. In recent years, the convent, which once sat on the outskirts of the city, has been surrounded by a pulsating working-class neighborhood. As we learn from Mudito, the convent itself will soon be auctioned off and destroyed.

It is not immediately clear how Mudito, who counts himself among the coterie of old women living in the convent, came to live there. And indeed, as many critics have discussed, the narrative he lays out makes it impossible to know exactly which parts of his story are real and which are figments of his fevered imagination. To give the reader an idea of the delirious range of possibilities, this is the general shape of the backstory he tells: As an aspiring writer of lower-middle-class extraction, Mudito, then known as Humberto Peñaloza, is drawn into the orbit of the powerful landowner and senator Jerónimo de Azcoitía, after the latter finances the former's first book. Then, if we are to believe what Mudito narrates in the present, he was hired as Jerónimo's secretary and became his body double after taking a

bullet for him at a political protest. This collapse of identity takes an even more harrowing turn when Humberto helps Jerónimo and his infertile wife Inés produce a monstrous son, Boy, in an act of copulatory witchcraft involving Inés's indigenous nursemaid. Repulsed by the monstrous son that results, Jerónimo creates an artificial world on his estate designed to hide the last Azcoitía from view and places Humberto in charge of it. In this new world, populated entirely by so-called freaks so that Boy can feel normal, Humberto writes the story of Don Jerónimo's life, entire passages of which appear in the narration. Fearing that Don Jerónimo's doctor has surreptitiously removed 80 percent of his organs, Humberto escapes from the estate and ends up in the Azcoitía convent, the space from within which he narrates his story in the present.

This is not the end point of the novel, and I am necessarily suppressing many details, but this short description will give the uninitiated reader a sense of the delirium it engenders. This delirium asserts itself through the situations imagined, but also in the schizoid perspective of Mudito, which zigzags between different moments in time, and between internal musings and dialogue. This makes it difficult to divine whether other characters share Mudito's version of events, or if they belong to his perspective alone. But the problem is even more serious, for while Mudito's first-person viewpoint dominates the text, it sometimes becomes difficult to tell if a different one has entered the fray. At times, for example, long passages pertaining to the life of Jerónimo de Azcoitía appear to be omnisciently narrated, passages that may or may not have been authored by Humberto before he became Mudito. And at other times, the narration seems to leave Mudito's perspective altogether; at one point, for example, the novel's point of view comes to rest temporarily in a cardboard box. *Obscene Bird* embeds a perspective so splintered that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to reassemble its constituent parts into a unified whole.

This lack of a unified perspective has led Donoso's critics, with few exceptions, to be rather vague about the historical features of this narrative breakdown. Most often, the identification of a general context of the decline of "feudalism" and the latifundio gives way, in a poststructuralist vein, to dehistoricized readings of the instability of language and identity in the novel, or the proliferation of nonlinear micronarratives of resistance.[21] And indeed, why historicize a novel if its main argument is that history itself can't be apprehended as a unifying narrative? And why point to the novel's

theorization of society if there is no such thing as social essence? To be sure, there are aspects of the novel that lend themselves to these interpretations: It is obsessed with the idea that there is no solid identity behind masks, and with the idea that history is not seamless. And yet, this is only half the story; the novel itself completes this partial view with a strong periodization of Chilean social relations that, just as in Fuentes's novel, allows us to apprehend how Mudito's splintered narrative perspective was produced in the first place.

For Humberto/Mudito's lack of stable identity is no transhistorical problem. Instead, it refers to *the* identity game that had organized social life in Chile for the past two centuries: that between masters and servants on large estates. Under the system known as *inquilinaje*, peons lived on the property owned by a landowner, providing labor in exchange for access to a small plot of land. As the historian José Bengoa notes, the large estate was the main nexus of Chilean sociability—and as a result, the Chilean novel—from the consolidation of estates in the eighteenth century until the mid-1960s, when those estates were finally dismantled by land reform.[22] This is, as I'll discuss in a moment, the very periodization the novel offers, specifically in relation to the problem of servants and masters in a moment of historical upheaval. In his famous master/slave dialectic, Hegel understood the social dynamics of bonded labor as creating a double bind: Masters subordinated slaves at the same time as they could only identify themselves in relation to their underlings; on the flip side, serfs acquiesced to subordination to their masters but found unexpected power in their conferral of recognition. Instead of pursuing a transhistorical, poststructuralist reading of identity in *Obscene Bird*, something closer to Hegel's dialectic, modified in relation to Chile's specific history, yields a much more satisfying reading of the text's intricacies.

We can begin by noting that the entire novel is organized along the lines of servitude: The convent is the property of the Azcoitías, a landed family, and its current use is to house women servants who are no longer useful to their masters, but who can't be cast aside, either. The novel's memorable opening lines announce the death of a particular servant, in a phone conversation Mudito overhears: "Misiá Raquel Ruiz (*Mistress* Raquel Ruiz, that is) shed many tears when Mother Benita called up to tell her that Brígida had died in her sleep" (3). Misiá Raquel announces that she will

move Brígida's remains to her family mausoleum so that the servant can keep the niche warm for when she herself dies:

> She'll be there, holding it for me, heating it with her body like in the days when she used to turn down the covers and slip a good hot water bottle under them, for me to go to bed early when I came in exhausted from running around on business errands in winter. But when I die she'll have to move out of my vault. (6)

Here and elsewhere, the polyphonic character of Mudito's narration expresses, in pitch-perfect tone, the prattle of everyday Chilean domesticity, which inevitably reveals a sordid, indeed obscene, underside: in this case, the fusion of servant and mistress that extends, quite literally, into the grave. Indeed, as Mudito notes later, the old women in the convent are nothing other than the invisible "other halves" of their masters, a site of abjection that is, in its forced intimacy, simultaneously a source of power:

> They save up the instruments of vengeance because their coarse warty hands collect, bit by bit, that other half of their masters—the useless, discarded half, the filth and the sordidness that, trusting and sentimental, they've been putting in their servants' hands with the insult of each shabby skirt they give them, each nightgown scorched by the iron. Why shouldn't they have their employers at their mercy, when they've washed their clothes, and when all the involvements and dirt they wanted to eliminate from their lives passed through their hands? (49, translation modified)

In this passage, the relationship that transforms servants into the abject and hidden "other half" of their masters asserts itself as the horror-inducing social principle at the heart of Chilean sociability. As such, it forms the ultimate ground for the doublings and identity games that the novel stages on nearly every page, which in turn produce Mudito's split perspective.

Mudito, in his previous existence as Humberto Peñaloza, was neither a landowner nor a servant, but a petty bourgeois urban intellectual several generations removed from the latifundio. He was born as the grandson of a train machinist from the agrarian South, and the son of a schoolteacher in Santiago; his sister, in turn, married the owner of a stationery shop. This trajectory of upward mobility, however, retains an attachment to the agrarian modes of servility it has ostensibly left behind: Humberto's father's reverence for the term *middle class*, which he invokes in hushed tones, was exceeded only by the reverence with which he pronounced the word *gentleman*, a category of social being that that must be respected, but never aspired to (79). When Humberto, as a young aspiring writer, meets

Jerónimo de Azcoitía for the first time in an anthropology museum, he is—to his horror—similarly dumbstruck by the landowner's physical beauty and grace, which make him feel like a monster in comparison. This sense of beauty and ugliness takes on the contours of class, but also race, as Jerónimo is constantly depicted with European characteristics, while Mudito bears the implicit stain of racial mixture. Monstrosity, a leitmotif that runs through the narrative in the form of disfigurement, freakishness, and mythical creatures, becomes in Humberto's case a psychic expression of an unvanquished master/servant dialectic. Perversely, an upwardly mobile, "free" petty bourgeois subject, whose family members exited the material bondage of the latifundio generations ago, remains beholden to its deepest psychic structures. Oscillating back and forth between poles of admiration and hatred, Humberto accepts the landowner's offer to finance his first book, then avoids him: When Jerónimo finds Humberto in a squalid downtown bar, the latter runs away, riven by excruciating stomach pains.

In one of the few extant materialist readings of *Obscene Bird*, Hernán Vidal maintains that Humberto/Mudito's perspective can be extended to that of the Chilean petty bourgeoisie as a whole: servile and lacking a clear identity.[23] As an expression of this lack, Vidal argues that while Humberto does become an indigent, everything that occurs in the aftermath of his encounter with Don Jerónimo in the bar is sheer fantasy: The service to Jerónimo as his secretary, the four-way copulation that creates the monstrous son Boy, the creation of a world of circus freaks on the estate, and so on, are figments of his fevered imagination. But while the class lineaments of Vidal's reading are entirely correct, I would not be so quick to delimit the point at which reality cedes to the fantasies of a fragmented consciousness. For while it is true that the novel's legibility depends upon a strong connection to Chilean reality—the element that, after all, makes it possible to periodize—it is less interesting, to my mind, to establish strict boundaries between reality and fantasy than to elucidate how fits of delusion might themselves illuminate larger social truths.

Mudito's split consciousness ultimately provides access to the sordid secrets of the Chilean latifundio, which only become available as the whole structure is collapsing. It is even more interesting in this regard that Mudito, born an urban petty bourgeois, *becomes* a servant over the course of the novel. As Bengoa notes, periods of proletarianization in the Chilean countryside could also turn back to bondage (or *reinquilización*) in

moments of economic crisis.[24] In the case of *Obscene Bird*, Donoso carefully stages the transformation of Humberto—an urban, middle-class subject with no living connection to the agrarian world—into an appendage of a landowner. This process might be said to begin with Humberto's first meeting with Jerónimo, but it becomes most clear in the instance in which, employed as Jerónimo's secretary, he reports that he took a bullet for the senator as the latter escaped from an angry mob. The context is as follows: Jerónimo and his Conservative Party have been accused of stealing votes to win an election, a common practice in rural Chile up until the 1960s. Humberto acts as a decoy so that Jerónimo can escape the mob. From a rooftop, Humberto, emboldened by his temporary identity as a gentleman, shouts, "Go ahead and kill me, you scum bastards, here I am" (168). In the original Spanish, he calls them "rotos de mierda" (187), a racialized class insult with a long history in Chile. Someone in the crowd, thinking he is the senator, shoots Humberto; Jerónimo, in turn, chooses to play along with the lie to reap the sympathy that follows. No one ever finds out that it was really Humberto, the landowner's double, who took the bullet: "I didn't steal his identity. They conferred it upon me. History picked out that moment as the apex of the power of an oligarchy that, from then on, declined" (169). Dialectically, the high point of oligarchic power also marks its decline; or, from another angle, the decline of the oligarchy makes previous moments available as ones of transition, an insight reproduced by the novel as a whole.

More specifically, the master/servant dialectic explored in the novel profanely illuminates a whole history of the Chilean latifundio and the forms of sociability it engenders. This becomes especially clear when Mudito borrows elements of a legend about masters and servants as the interpretive key to his life story. As told by the women in the convent, sometime in the eighteenth century, a Basque landowner by the name of Azcoitía came to possess an immense estate in Southern Chile. When "bad times" hit, marked by drought, small harvests, and "children born dead or with six fingers on one hand," the peons began to cast blame on the landowner's daughter, Inés (24). Rumors began to spread that Inés was a witch who had been initiated into the dark arts by her indigenous nanny; each night, the two women would leave their sleeping bodies behind to assume new forms. The girl's head would separate from her body and fly with enormous wings grown from her ears. This figure, known in Mapuche

legend as a *chonchón*, is a clear double for the obscene bird referenced in the novel's title. The nanny, in turn, would transform into a yellow dog and roam with her mistress across the countryside. One night, the landowner, alerted to the rumor by one of his nine sons, stormed into his daughter's bedchamber to discover a horrific secret he immediately hid behind his enormous poncho; his sons, meanwhile, killed the yellow dog, and threw the nanny's body into the river, prodding it along with sticks until it reached the sea. The landowner's daughter, upon returning to her own body, was sent to the capital city and locked away in a convent constructed for that purpose, the very house occupied by Mudito and the old servant women in the present.

The legend functions along the lines of the popular storytelling mode we have seen in novels such as Rómulo Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara* (chapter 1) and Rosario Castellanos's *Balún Canán* (chapter 3) as a means of narrating colonial processes of dispossession and forced servitude. In *Obscene Bird*, the legend introduces a strong periodizing principle into the novel. It was precisely at the end of the eighteenth century that landowners like the fictional Azcoitías were able, for the first time in Chilean history, to institute the degree of labor control necessary to create profitable agrarian enterprises through the institution of inquilinaje.[25] As a whole, then, the novel's vision of history comprises the consolidation of the latifundio to its disintegration in the 1960s. As a corollary, this periodizing gesture provides a key to understanding transition from the perspective of the novel's diegetic present. For although some readers have interpreted this legend as a transhistorical instance of "subaltern" resistance, it is more compelling, to my mind, as a means of exploring the master/servant bond as the bedrock of Chilean sociability from the eighteenth century to the novel's present. This becomes clear when Mudito/Humberto enlists the legend as a kind of master narrative for his own life: Jerónimo's wife, Inés, is the present-day incarnation of the eighteenth-century landowner's daughter, and her indigenous maid Peta Ponce is the witch accompanied by a yellow dog.

The supernatural elements embedded in the legend in turn provide access to the most perverse and obscene secrets of master/servant bonds. This becomes most clear in the section of the novel dealing with the engendering of the monstrous Azoitía heir, named Boy. Inés, we learn, had suffered extreme uterine pains as a girl; her maid Peta had sucked the bad spirits out of her womb, but this left her infertile. To restore her fertility, Peta

convinces Humberto to take on Jerónimo's identity in their marital bed. In the delirious scenes that follow, Humberto imagines himself as Jerónimo copulating with Inés, and himself copulating with Jerónimo, while Inés slowly moves back and forth between herself and Peta Ponce. These scenes, precisely in their unreality, provide prescient insight into master/servant relations: Masters' bodies pass in and out of their servants' bodies, as if they could not exist independently, much less produce or reproduce the world they live in on their own. I am reminded here of Richard Godden's reading of Faulkner, discussed in chapter 2, in which white masters come to the traumatic realization that they are nothing without the black labor that made their world.[26] In *Obscene Bird*, the delirious scene of a four-way copulation finds its own way of revealing that masters depend completely upon the labor of their servants, even when it comes to producing an heir. The one job the landed aristocracy is supposed to do all by itself to maintain its legitimacy and perceived purity cannot proceed without the direct intervention of racialized servants. If in earlier moments procreation could be taken for granted, in a moment of decline the reliance of masters on servants becomes visible, albeit in a totally scrambled, psychotic manner.

From this analysis we might conclude that the psychosis Mudito suffers results from the damage inflicted upon him by an old system of servitude, damage he cannot overcome. This is in a broad sense true, but I would argue that Mudito's breakdown—and the literary perspective it engenders—become apprehensible only in a moment in which those bonds are dissolving (much in the way that the apex of the oligarchy can only be diagnosed retroactively, in a moment of decline). Along these lines, the whole section of the novel dedicated to the transformation of the Azcoitía estate into a world of "freaks" designed to hide the monstrous heir from society points to the fact that neither landed families nor estates are behaving as they once did but instead have acquired fabulous distortions. Another case in point is Humberto's insistence that the landowner's doctor is stealing his organs, and, later, his assertion that the doctor has transplanted some of Peta's organs into Inés's body. If the novel points toward extreme violence, bondage, monstrosity, and body snatching as fundamental aspects of the latifundio, it also identifies the limits of its continued operation. The problem with Mudito is not simply that he remains psychically fused with Jerónimo, who may or may not even be

alive at the time the novel opens, but that he does so when the social structure that once sustained their relationship comes hurtling down.

Given the novel's interest in periodizing the latifundio system from its consolidation to its decline, we can finally ask what the future holds for subjects like Mudito and the old women inside the convent walls. Already in the diegetic present, the convent has been swallowed by a rapidly expanding and industrializing city: Sandwich-board advertisements, magazine kiosks, and cafés attest to a new logic reproducing itself outside the convent's walls, begging the question as to where the abject "other halves" of the decadent landed class might end up. It is here that another figure from Mapuche legend, the *imbunche*, takes on new meaning in the aftermath of servitude, as a referent for an emergent process of lumpenization. In Mapuche mythology, the imbunche is a monstrous being whose nine orifices are sewn shut by sorcerers. References to this figure abound throughout the novel. First mentioned in the eighteenth-century legend, it reappears in the old women's obsessive package making and in their swaddling of what they identify as a miracle child born to an orphan in the convent. But just as the eighteenth-century legend was adapted to the delirium-inducing decay of the latifundio in the 1960s, the imbunche is refashioned to evoke the terrifying social process emerging on the other side of agrarian transition: that of becoming *unbound* from patriarchal society, only to become literally bound to one's own self. The only thing worse than being an abject appendage is being cast off entirely.

This meaning of the imbunche as a castoff can most clearly be grasped in the final chapter of the novel, as preparations are made for the convent to be sold and torn down, and the old women are sent off to a new, "modern" house in a bourgeois neighborhood. As the women are about to board the buses to take them away, two trucks arrive carrying five hundred enormous pumpkins sent from Misiá Raquel's estate. Though she had promised this delivery a year earlier, the foreman has only now remembered, and the courtyard fills with pumpkins "whose growing number couldn't be stopped, as if they were reproducing obscenely right there in the corridor" (458). This episode, rendered in humorous tones, points to a final breakdown in the circuit linking the urban convent and the agrarian estate. City and country no longer form part of a unified whole: The proliferating pumpkins, together with the old women, become a form of unemployable surplus within the new system. The chapter takes a much darker turn when, after

the women leave on the buses, a figure recognizable as the eighteenth-century witch envelops Mudito and begins to sew his orifices shut: “I bite and tear, once more she keeps sewing to cut down my space” (464). Soon after, his first-person voice disappears, as a woman, accompanied by a scrawny yellow dog, reaches into her sack and throws the package into a fire under a bridge where indigents sleep.[27] With this gesture, Mudito also becomes superfluous within the emergent system. And while this process finds its referent in Mapuche myth, the process it encodes is entirely new, and particular to capitalism. For capitalism is the only system in which entire swathes of human activity, and humans themselves, are relentlessly drawn into its purview, only to be rendered superfluous. As Marx noted in his general law of capitalist accumulation, the tiny strip of human activity that generates surplus value transforms the vast majority of human activity into immiserated surplus labor: “Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time, accumulation of misery.”[28] This analysis resonates deeply in Latin America, where even in moments of industrial expansion, the labor liberated from the countryside always far exceeded capital’s ability to absorb it. In the 1960s, Latin American sociologists began to address this problem under the rubric of “the marginal mass”; Donoso’s novel, more than merely illustrating this problem, finds an aesthetic language able to capture its truly obscene dimensions.[29] While the term *marginal* eventually came to signify *countercultural* or *oppositional*, Donoso’s novel returns us to its roots in a structural condition within capitalist economies, whose fundamental irrationality dwarfs even the fever dreams of Mudito.

So, what are cities made of? The agrarian world of the past, the cast-off remnants of which are being actively transformed into an unemployable surplus, which in the novel takes the form of trash. Upon closer inspection, the fragmented, delirious musings mobilized by the novel as a whole, over whose structure Donoso labored for a decade, might be viewed as an exquisitely wrought net of detritus left over from the world of the latifundio; or, to use the metaphor Mudito uses as he is being sewn up, a package of trash embroidered as if out of the “finest batiste” in the moment it is poised to be swept away (464). And while the most powerful referent for this embroidery is Mudito, his story also evokes that of untold millions in Chile and across the world. Here it is germane to recall the newspaper clippings that Mudito placed behind the wallpaper in one of the convent

cells, detailing calamities such as “thousands of lives destroyed by the flooding of the Yangtse Kian, the Watusis wiped out, famine in Northeast Brazil” (310). A similarly widened worldview opens when Mudito, transformed into an imbunche, is about to be cast into the fire. “And for centuries I wait for another geological layer to be formed, with the detritus of millions of lives that they say exist, to bury my longing once more” (464). Mudito’s voice, itself the detritus of agrarian transition, disappears; the novel, however, remains as a kind of profane monument to its passage. As in the case of Fuentes’s *Artemio Cruz*, perhaps the chief insight of Donoso’s novel is its ability to evoke, by aesthetic means, the entire sweep of a transition whose contours would increasingly disappear from view. Like the owl of Minerva, the obscene bird flies only as night is falling.

At the same time, one might rightfully interpret *Obscene Bird*’s apocalyptic ending as placing a serious break on its ability to evoke historical movement. This is indeed the respectable view of an early critic like Antonio Cornejo Polar, who charges Donoso with extending the destruction of the landed class to all of society: “If *their world* disappears, it means that *the* world is destroyed.”[30] For unlike Fuentes, whose novel ends with a postscript from Havana, Donoso seems to reject even the possibility of gesturing toward a new, revolutionary cycle. This is especially noteworthy given that Donoso’s novel, unlike Fuentes’s, was published in the same year in which a move toward socialism was actually happening in Chile, under the aegis of the Popular Unity government inaugurated in 1970. Viewed from the perspective of that watershed event—achieved by the mass militancy of proletarians and peasants alike—*Obscene Bird* seems to miss something important about the directions being taken by Chilean history. Save for a few passing references to land invasions, the novel doesn’t even contemplate the possibility of overthrowing the ideological baggage of the dying patriarchal order, much less the possibility of anything approximating militancy among the masses. As in his previous novel, *Hell Has No Limits*, examined in the previous chapter, Donoso focuses on the most conservative and reactionary elements of Chilean society, as if no other possibilities existed. But as I also argued with respect to that earlier novel, if Donoso’s blindness functions as a limitation from the perspective of 1970, it retroactively presents some insight into 1973, the year of the overthrow of the Allende government and institution of a seventeen-year counterrevolution that razed socialist horizons and consolidated the

capitalist economy on a scale never before achieved. From *that* vantage point, *Obscene Bird* is prescient in training its eye on the most hoary and reactionary aspects of Chilean sociability, together with the new obscenities to which they were actively giving birth.

Foxes on the Factory Floor

The aesthetic principle of separation defining the novels studied thus far in this chapter is stretched to a new, perhaps final limit in José María Arguedas's posthumously published *The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below* (hereafter *The Foxes*). I alluded to this novel in the introduction to this book as an entry point into the twentieth-century agrarian novel; here I return to it as the culmination of that form. The title of the novel refers to mythical foxes from "above" (the Andes) and "below" (the coast) and announces the novel's chief concern with the exodus and dispersal of highland indigenous communities in the mid-twentieth century. Left unfinished at the time of Arguedas's death by suicide in 1969, the novel is a unique hybrid composed of two main features: first, a set of omnisciently narrated chapters that track the movements of mostly Andean migrants to the industrial port city of Chimbote, Peru, a city that had risen in the space of a decade to become the world's leading producer of anchovy-based fish meal. These narrative episodes are intercalated, in turn, with a second form: a set of personal diaries in which the author grapples with a particularly intense episode of depression, an affliction he suffered most of his adult life. The writing of the novel, Arguedas openly notes in the diary, was an attempt to overcome his depression and "reforge the broken link with all things" (9). This attempt at a self-cure fails, however, and dramatically so; his last diary entry announces the suicide he would carry out a few months later.

Whereas the novels previously discussed in this chapter are driven by a split narrative perspective, in *The Foxes* a first-person authorial perspective cleaves off from the narrative altogether, leaving both adrift, or, to borrow a term frequently used by Arguedas, orphans (*wakchas*). The consequences of this separation are far-reaching and constitute the core of the novel's difficult structure. Neither the diaries nor the narratives can stand alone, but neither can they be integrated into a seamless whole, a situation that drives

each of the component parts toward a process of decomposition whose only limit, at least from the author's perspective, is his own death. The diaries are driven by an illness, depression, that the author feels incapable of controlling; the narrative chapters, in turn, cannot sustain integrated action. In contrast with Arguedas's earlier realist novels, chapters clustering on different characters do not coalesce into any cohesive narrative structure. Arguedas, in his last diary entry, admits to this problem, noting that his impending death will cut short the stories he has begun: "This uneven tale is the image of that uneven struggle" (256).

It seems obvious that depression was the most immediate reason why Arguedas could not finish his novel. But the lack of unity that defines *The Foxes* is also a symptom of something much larger than the author's personal trajectory. In formal terms, it expresses nothing less than an epochal shift that, while in some sense opaque to Arguedas, was in another sense quite clear: the disarticulation of the Andean indigenous agrarian commune as the end result of a decades-long standoff with forces of capitalism and imperialism. From this perspective, *The Foxes* is the final, tragic installment of the author's multivolume cycle aimed at tracking highland indigenous struggles for liberation in mid-century Peru. This project, as I examined in chapter 3, was born with his 1930s short stories and reached maturity with his 1941 novel *Yawar Fiesta*. That novel, we'll remember, identified a key site of tension in indigenous projects of liberation: how people might become free from the brutal domination by landowners while also avoiding the specifically *capitalist* form of freedom —from land and community—likely to unfold unless some as-yet unrealized revolutionary force was able to transcend it. This struggle for indigenous liberation was never straightforward, but only apprehensible "beneath the surface" of daily life, as Arguedas himself put it, which was why the novel became a key mode of apprehending its unpredictable and contradictory outcomes.[31] After *Yawar Fiesta*, some of Arguedas's later novels ended with a temporary but indecisive victory for the indigenous collective, such as when serfs (colonos) brutalized by a landowner march on the town cathedral at the end of *Deep Rivers*. Novels could also end with defeat, such as when indigenous communities and townspeople alike are evicted by a mining company's bulldozer at the end of the sprawling realist epic *All the Bloodlines*. In all cases, however, Arguedas assumed the

presence of indigenous communities that, while always experiencing change, retained their collective character.

The Foxes, however, marks a new, decisive moment in the decades-long historical process examined by Arguedas in his previous novels: the large-scale exodus of members of highland indigenous communities to the coast. Already in 1961, Arguedas had proclaimed that demographic pressures and land scarcity were forcing the poorest communities out of the Andes: "They don't have any path except to migrate … The *indio* from the dissolved communities is compelled to leave forever."[32] To be sure, this process of communal dissolution was far from complete, and indigenous resistance to dispossession by landlords and mining concerns remained strong. In the early 1960s, indigenous peasants and labor organizers participated in a series of land seizures in the Cuzco region under the memorable slogan "Land or Death."[33] And in 1969, shortly before Arguedas's suicide, the left-leaning military government of Juan Velasco launched an ambitious land reform program to transform large estates into peasant cooperatives, a move Arguedas hailed. Land reform, especially, slowed migration from the countryside, but did not stop it entirely. Arguedas's final novel, in focusing on migrants to a coastal city, captures a general tendency that would only become more pronounced near the end of the twentieth century: In 1940, two-thirds of the country's population lived in rural areas, and one-third in cities; by 1980, however, these percentages had flipped in exact proportions.[34] (Today, only around a fifth of the population lives in rural areas.) Given this pronounced trend, it is not coincidental that Arguedas concluded his multivolume novelistic cycle on the Peruvian Andes in the port of Chimbote.

Most critics have approached this change in setting as marking a cultural problem: how indigenous cultures survive and/or transform in the city. And while this was undoubtedly a key concern of Arguedas, it was always accompanied by an inquiry into the material processes that drove migration in the first place: the separation of people from their means of subsistence, and their transformation into what Marx called "free, unprotected and rightless proletarians."[35] What is at stake in this novel, then, is not only transformation of indigenous culture, but that of social substance itself. It is only by examining this transformation that we can appreciate the novel's considerable insights into epochal agrarian transition, and the new social world it brings into being. As a starting point, we can note that none of the

characters in *The Foxes* are peasants, much less members of a functioning agrarian community; instead, they are occasional fishermen, sex workers, market stall vendors, and, only very rarely, factory workers. In multiple instances, we hear how different characters arrived in Chimbote from the highlands, fleeing from immiseration and the abuse of landowners, hunger, and diminishing plots of land. In some cases, characters have been itinerant for years, passing through stints on plantations, in mines, or as domestic servants in Lima. Eventually they arrive in Chimbote seeking work in the factories. But as part of the overall situation of the dependent, peripheral industrial city, the factories cannot employ even a fraction of the labor "liberated" from the countryside, and migrants are immediately transformed into members of an industrial reserve army eking out a living in sprawling urban slums. Fishmeal, meanwhile, is in demand on the global market as animal feed and is sent to far-flung locales. Such a result bears the hallmark irrationality of capitalist economy: people who once grew their own food become members of a reserve army of labor in a city whose factories process anchovies for use in agricultural production elsewhere. Indigenous Andean peasants, in this manner, become appendages of a global food system in which, perversely, they play no productive role. Meanwhile, the ecological contradictions of such a regime become scandalously evident in the draining of nutrients from the sea. The novel's harrowing images of pelicans dropping dead from hunger are just one indication of this collapsing ecosystem. Everything, it seems, in Chimbote has been ripped from the soil (or sea) and put up for sale. It is perhaps for this reason that the novel is so interested in sexual commerce: Brothels proliferate throughout the slums, and the sea is frequently evoked—in bluntly gendered terms—as a gigantic vagina penetrated by fishermen.[36]

We are far from, to say the least, the ordered communities of Arguedas's previous novels. Even as some of Chimbote's inhabitants retain access to gardens and farm animals, or remember old myths, their social being has been fundamentally altered by capital. This alteration becomes apparent not just via the novel's content but on a deep level of form, as the dissolution of the indigenous community drives a concomitant dissolution of his earlier realist practice. One of the most interesting and innovative aspects of Arguedas's previous works was their preference for representing collectives rather than individuals. This is not to say that individual characters did not exist, but their scope and action was always directly tied to the existence of

a functioning agrarian collective. In *The Foxes*, however, that community dissolves before Arguedas's eyes. As a result, individuals suddenly proliferate beyond the author's ability to keep track of them; their lack of a legible social organization, in turn, becomes a problem the text can't quite resolve. In the novel's first chapter, for example, the omniscient narrative perspective alights on a series of characters in a process that, it would seem, has no logical endpoint. The chapter opens at dawn on an anchovy trawler crewed by an Andean migrant, Chaucato, and his two employees. Quickly, though, the narrative abruptly shifts to place Chaucato in a brothel, only to alight once more on a Quechua-speaking fisherman, Anto. After suffering the racist abuses of a taxi driver on his way home, Anto ends up in a cheaper brothel, known as "the corral," where the narrative switches perspective once again to track two *chuchumecas*, or sex workers, as they trudge up the unpaved, unlit sand hills of a slum after a night's work. One of the women stops to face the factories and sings a song about serpents, a millenarian symbol of catastrophe:

> sand mountain serpent
> fish-meal factory serpent
> pejerrey challway, little anchovy, serpent
> highway serpent (51)

This song recalls ones sung by women in Arguedas's earlier novels and reproduced entirely in Quechua. In these previous novels, however, songs evoked a unity among all living beings; the chuchumeca's song, by contrast, calls attention to the separation of previous unities in the form of slums, highways, and factories. As if to highlight the disunity animating this new social world, an unnamed day laborer takes offense at the song's disrespect for the Peruvian flag, and the two enter into an altercation that ends with the chuchumeca throwing sand into his eyes. The narrative shifts yet again to follow the day laborer home to his shack, where his wife and family sleep atop emptied sacks of fish meal.

Here and elsewhere in the novel, one setting and character becomes a communicating vessel for the next, as a formal expression of the massive expansion of slums springing up to accommodate some 250,000 people. The sheer quantity of inhabitants becomes quality, as characters who once belonged to a community become structurally anonymous to one another. In comparison with the cultural and narrative unity guiding Arguedas's earlier

novels, *The Foxes* disperses people like the sand the chuchumeca throws, or like the grains of fish meal that once filled the sacks serving as makeshift beds in a slum. It is not immediately clear who or what is presiding over this new order. The name of a capitalist, Braschi, is continually invoked by characters (as another serpent in the chuchumeca's song, for example), but he never appears in the flesh. In like manner, the social force that separates people from their previous social arrangements and flings them into a slum remains shadowy and opaque.

If classical realism emerged in nineteenth-century Europe precisely as a form capable of marshaling and organizing individuals in the capitalist city, it is precisely this movement that makes realism impossible for Arguedas. One of the consequences of the unruly proliferation of individuals in *The Foxes* is that a key feature of his earlier realist works—forward-moving linear narrative—becomes impossible to sustain. In individual chapters, action moves from character to character, sometimes to land on someone who will never be heard from again. Between chapters, storylines emerge but do not intersect in any meaningful way. In the second chapter, for example, a group of migrants carries the crosses adorning their dead relatives' graves from an old cemetery to a new one, even though officials have prohibited them from doing so. In contrast with Arguedas's earlier novels, this episode neither creates a catalyst for further action (as when an ayllu raids a neighboring plain to capture a bull in *Yawar Fiesta*), nor a climatic event (as when a typhus-stricken group of indigenous serfs marches on a cathedral in *Deep Rivers*). In *The Foxes*, the cemetery march becomes just another event occurring in the city on any given day, with little bearing on later action. The novel produces, as a result, a kind of narrative entropy: Characters proliferate as individuals, but, as a direct result, their actions don't create a cohesive fictional world. In exploring this new and irrevocable moment of agrarian transition, *The Foxes* marks the logical culmination of Arguedas's realist practice. The world he discovers, however, signals the end of that very practice.

Readers familiar with other global contexts might recognize this breakdown of realism in the city, amid the proliferation of anonymous characters, as a form of modernism. And this category is helpful, in a limited manner, insofar as it marks a new moment distinct from realism. At the same time, however, precisely because the specifically collective dimensions of Andean society embedded distinct elements within

Arguedas's earlier realist project, the breakdown of that mode will yield results quite distinct from those that usually go under the name of modernism, or, for that matter, Latin American versions of modernism like the boom. Social conditions won't allow Arguedas to continue to employ realist means of representation. At the same time, however, his continued allegiance to both a communal perspective and a socially committed conception of literature won't allow him to reunite fragments into a meticulously crafted work of modernist art.

In a similar manner, Arguedas can't anchor his perspective in an indigenous collective because, as a function of the history his novel aims to examine, it has ceased to exist in the city. At the same time, however, as a mark of his continued allegiance to the collective, he is unable to choose *one* individual, or even a concentrated set of individuals, as an entry point into the world of Chimbote. In contrast with *Artemio Cruz* and Donoso's *Obscene Bird*, which are constructed around the split consciousness of a single subjectivity, *The Foxes* proceeds with little examination into characters' inner thoughts, choosing to instead focus on long dialogues. This refusal to examine individual subjectivities perhaps bears the negative imprint of previous collective social arrangements. At the same time, the individual subjectivity of the author is on full display in the diaries he intercalates with narrative chapters, which are full of pain and self-doubt. But these diaries, rather than bringing the novel closer to *Artemio Cruz* and *Obscene Bird*, distance it even further, since they refuse integration into the narrative. It is as if the committed author, separated from the communities he once wrote about, is forced to suffer his own fate *alone*, as an individual. In this manner, the experimental nature of *The Foxes* seems to result against the author's will, as a kind of hostage situation he can't escape.[37]

The breakdown of a narrative impulse in *The Foxes* has made it a favored text of deconstructionist critics suspicious of the novel's ability to produce any sort of stable meaning, much less evocation of a social totality in flux. Alberto Moreiras, for example, argues that, in contrast with the conciliatory understandings of cultural conflict offered by Ángel Rama's theory of transculturation and Gabriel García Márquez's brand of magical realism, Arguedas's *The Foxes* posits "a violent conflict of cultures that will not be mediated away" (103). This refusal of mediation is best exemplified, in turn, through the literal death of Arguedas, which for Moreiras transforms *The Foxes* into "a passionate signifier at the end of signification" (102).[38]

By this logic, the novel doesn't so much point back to the social antagonisms that produced the need for conciliation in the first place, but rather to an implosion of meaning itself.

But such a proposition is plausible only if we, as critics, refuse mediation by equating Arguedas's suicide with a collapse of meaning writ large. To the contrary, I would argue that Arguedas's novel, in the very process of exhausting narrative possibilities, produces a vision of transition that is meaningful in its own right, especially when it comes to the new social world being created after the image of capital. Along these lines, the dialectical underside of the unintegrated and fragmentary status of *The Foxes* is its imperfect unity as a single work of art. As a corollary, Arguedas's novel does not fully relinquish the problem of totality, but instead poses it anew, through the re-assembly of sundered elements into a sui generis form. And it is by staging, simultaneously, processes of sundering and suturing, that *The Foxes* is able to provide a compelling, if fleeting, glimpse of something new in the making. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin's well-known Brechtian maxim, *The Foxes* concerns itself not so much with the good old days but instead with the bad new ones.

And it is with respect to these bad new days, I think, that *The Foxes* succeeds in far greater terms than its author might have been imagined, by discovering, however incipiently, aesthetic means for capturing emergent aspects of capitalism in its peripheral, dependent guise. As already noted, Arguedas could not make this discovery through previous realist means because the collective basis for that form had disappeared, if not in society as a whole, at least in the city the novel imagines. But a modernist poetics, in which a fragmented social reality becomes a meticulously crafted artistic object, does not provide a suitable form either. The key to evoking unfolding social reality therefore had to be located elsewhere. Contradictorily, perhaps, this discovery occurs principally through a reinvention of Andean myth, an element that, once separated from its grounding in indigenous communities, emerges in *The Foxes* as a reconfigured collective standpoint capable of glimpsing the contours of an emergent social order in the capitalist city.

Myth had formed a key aspect of Arguedas's previous literary works, as a set of beliefs grounded in Andean indigenous communal practices. A belief in the unity among all living beings, a concept that extends from people and animals, to land, mountains, and rivers, was deeply embedded in his

authorial perspective from its earliest instantiations. Myth could change, as it did in *Yawar Fiesta*, in which, amid a landscape of social upheaval, one community killed a bull another believed to be a mountain deity. Even so, it remained a key axis of communal life. In *The Foxes*, however, the dissolution of indigenous communities produces a notable weakening of a mythic impulse in daily life. As William Rowe has noted, myth loses its force as a collective site of meaning and migrates to the realm of individuals: This becomes clear, for example, when Esteban, an Andean migrant suffering from black lung disease after working a stint in a mine, buys a cure from a shaman and seeks a yellow butterfly as a sign it is working. His coastal Afro-Peruvian friend, the beggar-prophet Moncada, insists, however, that no sign is forthcoming, because in this world, "There's no messenger of anything" (147).[39] Likewise, when the sex worker sings her serpentine song to the factory, she sings it alone, as her companion "walk[s] off indifferently" into the night (51).

This waning of myth in everyday life is compensated for, however, by its amplification on the level of the narrative apparatus, by way of the titular Foxes. As already noted, these Foxes are mythical creatures that hail from the Andes and the coast, respectively. Concretely, they appear in a seventeenth-century Quechua manuscript Arguedas translated into Spanish as *Dioses y hombres del Huarochirí* (Men and gods of Huarochirí). The manuscript, originally commissioned by a priest as a tool of evangelization, recounts a series of creation myths focusing on the mountain deity known as Pariacaca. In *The Foxes*, the mythic system outlined in the Huarochirí manuscript becomes an unexpected site of unification and totalization in an otherwise fractured novel. While Arguedas's proliferating characters, as atomized individuals, are unable to make sense of the world, the Foxes reintroduce something like a will to totality. As Arguedas himself notes in the final diary, whereas his human characters are "half-demented people who have been overwhelmed," the Foxes are able to view Chimbote with clarity; in narrative terms, their aim is to "stitch together … the materials and souls this narrative had begun to drag along" (258).

On the most basic level, the Foxes' millenarian lineage conjures an order anterior to the processes of separation and alienation that constitute the novel's mutilated structure, and as such continues to point toward a utopian horizon of indigenous collectivity. To survive in *The Foxes*, however, myth must assert a degree of distance from the daily life that once sustained it.

Myth, that is, functions in the novel as a kind of phantom limb, still connected to the social body from which it was severed but operating of its own accord. Along these lines, the titular Foxes insert themselves into Arguedas's first-person authorial voice in the diaries seemingly independently of his will, to announce that they have met up after a period of 2,500 years to survey the new city of Chimbote. Even though it is obviously Arguedas narrating the diaries (and novel), the Foxes appear to speak behind his back, referring to him impersonally as "the individual who tried to take his own life and is writing this book" (54). As an outcome of the rendering-separate of myth from the human collectives that once sustained it, myth acquires a totally new valence: The Foxes are millenarian sages, but they are called forth by the present. As the Fox from Up Above says to his counterpart in one of the diaries: "Like a duck tell me about Chimbote" (54), which is to say, tell me, from a perspective of myth, the story of the modern world, with its smoke-belching factories, mysterious capitalists, and sprawling slums.

And nowhere is the contemporary valence of myth on greater display than in what is to my mind the most revelatory and original chapter of the entire novel, in which the Foxes come to life in—of all places—a factory. Though they initially take human form, they eventually reveal themselves to be the titular Foxes, who, in keeping with their totalizing function, endeavor to provide "the overall picture, the total panorama" (113) of contemporary Chimbote. The chapter opens as the manager of the Nautilus fishing and fish meal factory, Don Angel, sits in his office alone late at night, and is interrupted by a visitor, Don Diego. The latter arrives at the factory seemingly unannounced, bearing a letter. Unfazed by the strange circumstances of the visit, the manager initiates a lengthy and involved conversation about the factory system, particularly the fate of migrants who continue to stream down the Andes, even when factories can no longer employ them. Diego asks, for example: "Why do the highlanders keep coming down to Chimbote? Do they know the factories are reducing their workforce to a fifth? That it doesn't suit the industry to keep on employing permanent workers with a right to receive benefits and that they'll soon be eliminated—all of them—and there'll be nothing left but temporaries hired by the system of general contractors?" (94). The manager Don Angel, in turn, responds that "the 'humble people,' as they call themselves, poured down out of the Andes in torrents, because up in the sierra—I've seen it

myself—the *hacienda* owners, large and small, piss in the mouths and in the minds of the Indians and squeeze the juice out of 'em" (96). The conversation continues over the course of many pages, covering topics ranging from the early days of the fish meal boom and formation of a militant labor movement (whose gains with a historic strike evaporated with a currency readjustment), to the introduction of ever-more advanced machines to further reduce the paid labor force: "I told you we cut the workforce down from 258 to 96, didn't I?" (91).

Although the conversation between the two men revolves around a discussion of Chimbote's contemporary reality, the scene unfolds in a decidedly nonrealist manner. The two characters wink at one another, sing songs, and eventually dance amid the machines, highly theatrical gestures punctuated with statements such as: "Shall we take a tour through the factory, Don Angel Rincón?" (119). The pared-down, half-lit factory, largely emptied of the multitudes filling the previous chapters, lends the chapter a purposefully eerie and artificial quality. Even more unsettling, though, is how the economic content of the speech—rates of employment, historic strikes, new machines, dwindling supplies of anchovies—contrasts with their aesthetic mode of presentation, a characteristic often associated with Brechtian theater.[40] Arguedas, a writer who came of age amid the internationalism of the 1930s, greatly admired Brecht, and it is not a stretch to sense his influence in these scenes. The defamiliarizing gap between economic content and aesthetic form is taken in novel directions by *The Foxes*, though, with the revelation that Diego is, in fact, one of the mythical Foxes of the novel's title. Described as "harmoniously short-legged" with "long, sparse whiskers" (89), he slowly reveals himself to be the Andean Fox from Up Above, at one point growing pointed ears and emitting blue vapors from his nostrils. Don Ángel, in turn, reveals himself as the Fox from Down Below: Bopping up and down to an Andean song, he suddenly acquires a likeness to "those lizards in the rocky places on the coast of Peru—little old animals skitter away in fright only to come to an abrupt halt on the edge or needle-sharp point of some eroded rock" (118). Here and elsewhere, the Foxes are reintegrated into a unified nature; the factory, in turn, is enveloped into a temporal plane that precedes it by millennia. William Rowe has already examined how, as in Walter Benjamin's messianic understanding of history, Arguedas mobilizes Andean myth to blast open the present.[41] Building on that observation, I'd like to call

attention to how myth profanely illuminates the strange and hallucinatory character of the present itself, particularly with respect to the wholly irrational operations of capital.

Myth in *The Foxes* gravitates toward the forcefield of capital, both to highlight its diabolical strangeness and identify still-living sites of unity in an otherwise alienated social universe. As an indication of this new valence of myth, the Andean Fox abandons his human form at the end of the chapter to run across seemingly endless bags of fish meal, relating to an absent addressee: "'I counted twenty thousand sacks of fish meal,' he said. 'You hear me?'" (137). The image of a millenarian fox running along endless fish meal bags is jarring and weird, to say the least, and in tenor with the overall difficulty of the text. In order to appreciate its significance, it's necessary to ask, on a basic level, why the Foxes are more active in the factory than in any other setting in the novel. The choice is significant because, in a real sense, the capitalist mode of production actively kills myth and the collective social forms that sustain it through the relentless rationalization of production for a sole, impoverished purpose: the generation of surplus value. But from another angle, the factory emerges as the setting in the novel best suited to the proliferation of myth, because the inherent mystery of production under capitalism seems to welcome a parallel, though much older, form of magic. When Don Angel notes that his factory operates twenty-four hours a day, swallowing anchovies and "defecating gold," he gestures toward the strange alchemy of capital that, on some level, already transforms the factory into a diabolically magical space in its own right. The machines in the factory, in particular, with their incessant and seemingly autonomous movement, serve as the backdrop for Diego's hallucinatory transformation from human into fox: "Breathing not with his own chest, but with that of the eight machines," he "began to turn around with his arms outstretched," growing pointed ears and emitting blue vapors (130). It is then that he begins to spin and dance.

In his well-known "Fragment on Machines" in the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes that the machine confronts individual workers as a "mighty organism" that operates seemingly of its own accord; in this scenario, the machine appears as a "virtuoso, with a soul of its own."[42] Arguedas's *The Foxes* provides a startling and novel depiction of this alien metaphysical power by way of a dancing Fox whose own movements mimic those of the machine, and whose lungs seem to inflate to its rhythms. The Fox's dance

heightens the mystery of the machine at the same time as it seeks to identify the mythic sites of unity that precede its operations. When one of the few workers in the factory recognizes Diego as a mythical Fox, for example, he is recognizing a surviving communal substrate that might be reactivated amid ongoing processes of separation occurring in the factory. Even so, the meaning and valence of myth shift dramatically when faced with the force field of capital. The machine, that is, begets the Fox's dance, not the other way around.

The capacity of capital to spark a mythic response is a recurrent feature in so-called magical realism. The famous levitation of Remedios la Bella in Gabriel García Márquze's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for example, occurs directly after she visits the banana plantations for the first time. Arguedas's novel takes the reinvention of myth even further, though, by deploying it to shed light on the operations of capital itself: the production of surplus value, to be sure, but outside that narrow zone of value production, the scandalous amounts of nature and labor squandered by that very process. For, at bottom, the Foxes' dance on the factory floor highlights the profound irrationality of a system that draws all living things into its purview, only to devour and expel them. The centrifuges that inspire Diego's dance crush anchovies into oil, then spit out the rest as a waste product—as Angel notes, "They're not good for anything" (152). The mechanical universe, in turn, operates with ever-dwindling quantities of human labor. As Angel notes in one of his many offhand references to decreasing rates of employment in the factory, five machines are operated by "one lone cholo" (120). Behind this pithy statement stands a larger truth: Even as capital relentlessly draws living labor into its purview, it expels it in even greater measure. People are separated from subsistence in the Andes and transformed into proletarians at the very moment in which capital's need for living labor is at an all-time low. This situation was first outlined by Marx as "the general law of capitalist accumulation," whose peculiar law of population implies that the "greater attraction of workers by capital is accompanied by their greater repulsion."[43] Behind the "lone cholo" operating several machines looms a reserve army of vast proportions around which the factory scene, and indeed the novel as a whole, is organized.

Given the recent Andean origins of migrants in *The Foxes*, it becomes plausible to view the mythic perspective offered by the Foxes as hailing

from the reserve army itself, conjured as a ghostly presence on the factory floor. This connection is driven home when Angel and Diego discuss an insect known as the *onquray onquray*, or "sickness of sickness," which typically signifies a bad omen. But Diego, who sees an insect flying, catches it, and bites off its head, immediately recognizes it as figure for "the highlanders from all the towns in the Andean mountains" that "keep coming down to look for work" (92). In a manner akin to the imbunche in Donoso's novel, the onquray onquray acquires new meaning in relation to surplus labor in the capitalist city. But in contrast with Donoso, for whom the imbunche signifies an apocalyptic vision, Arguedas mobilizes myth as a means of reviving its old collective associations in the present. Along these lines, when Diego dances, Angel repeatedly hears the "droning" of an insect's wings, which might be interpreted as the low-frequency buzz of an atomized and dispersed collective, brought back together through myth (116).

In a famous passage from the *Grundrisse*, Marx asks whether Greek myth can survive in societies dominated by commodity relations:

> What chance has Vulcan against Roberts & Co., Jupiter against the lightning-rod and Hermes against the Crédit Mobilier? All mythology overcomes and dominates and shapes the forces of nature in the imagination and by the imagination; it therefore vanishes with the advent of real mastery over them.[44]

A novel like *The Foxes* reveals that myth might indeed persist, at least for a time, in a world of abstract commodity and money relations, but it will inevitably be transformed in the bargain. With this transformation, myth acquires an acutely historical dimension, and its sacred content reorients itself toward a new absolute: capital. If it is true that this movement attests to the dissolution of the communities that once sustained myth, it also yields a new standpoint, reconfigured from the old, for apprehending the forces shaping the contemporary world. In the process, Andean myth brings us back to older notions of community, but in a manner that is itself not mythic but historical.

The question remains, however, how the still-visible collective substrate of Andean myth mobilized in *The Foxes* might produce action in the future. We have already seen that for Arguedas, current conditions preclude action, at least in narrative terms; this is why myth, severed and reconstituted as a semi-autonomous principle, is marshalled to provide some degree of unity

in an otherwise disjointed and fragmentary text. In the novel's chapters, the old agrarian community has been dissolved, at least in the city. New forms of organization, whether on the part of workers, those expelled from the productive system, or both, have not coalesced as a clear counterweight to capital and empire. The emergent forms of sociality elaborated in the novel —such as the friendship between the migrant Esteban and the beggar-prophet Moncada, or that between a liberation theology priest and an indigenized gringo—exist, but they don't produce any meaningful narrative closure. Instead, as Arguedas outlines in the last diary included in the novel, he finds himself unable to bring the interactions between characters to any resolution at all: Events like "the struggle between the leftist leaders and others in the fishermen's union" (256); Moncada's final sermon at an informal market destined for bulldozing; the sex worker Orfa's dive off a cliff into "the whitened silence of sea-fowl dung" (257), will all be left unfinished.

As a final, tragic attempt to compensate for what narrative action can no longer produce, Arguedas wills his death to *produce* a transition:

> Perhaps with me one historical cycle draws to a close and another begins in Peru, with all that this represents. It means the closing of the cycle of the consoling calendar lark, of the whip, of being driven like beast of burden, of impotent hatred, of mournful funeral "uprisings," of the fear of God and of the predominance of that God and his protegees, his fabricators. It signifies the opening of the cycle of light and the indomitable, liberating strength of the Vietnamese man, of the fiery calendar lark, of the Liberator God. That God who is coming back into action. Vallejo was the beginning and the end. (259)

This passage seems to relinquish narrative altogether insofar as it collapses the distinction between text and author, representation, and life. Moreover, these final words transform myth—always a collective affair—into an act of individual fiat, not in any individualistic or self-aggrandizing way, but as a means of calling attention to the novel's failure to diagnose where society might be headed. In the absence of that discovery, the author, beset by depression, wills his death to end a cycle of unfreedom and the beginning of genuine liberation. Tellingly, this era of liberation manifests itself through references to Vietnamese anti-imperial struggle and the writer César Vallejo, whose socialist commitment continued to resonate deeply with Arguedas. In the final instance, utopian energies can't be generated by the novel itself; they must be inserted by collapsing the division between representation and reality. At the same time, as noted earlier with respect to

deconstructionist readings of the novel, this collapse of mediation on the part of the author doesn't have to result in a collapse of meaning for the reader. Rather, it can be approached historically, as a narrative whose very process of disintegration evokes a historical transition while also retaining a foothold in utopia.

Against the grain of Arguedas's personal despair, his strongly historical thinking may open once again onto some kind of utopian gesture, not in the form of the radical alterity of an indigenous ontology or epistemology, as is common in contemporary decolonial thought, but in pointing toward the epochal shifts that undergird our compromised present. While the separations that ushered that present into being are in some sense irrevocable—there is no going back to the way things used to be—it is not guided by stasis either. Arguedas's novel, together with the others studied in this chapter, provide fleeting images of movement, which, however horrific and tragic, might guard against the reification of the present into something eternal. If concrete historical movements produced the separation of people from subsistence, community, and the products of their labor, future movement might produce something different. And if, as we have seen, the 1960s novel does not, indeed cannot, provide any prescriptive guidelines for change, it may, at the very least, help revive our capacity for epochal thinking in a moment that seems to prohibit it.

Coda

What's Left of the Countryside? The Twenty-First-Century Post-Agrarian Novel

The modern [age] is the urbanization of the country.

Karl Marx

This book has explored how, between roughly 1910 and 1970, the Latin American agrarian novel plotted a series of epoch-making transitions from predominantly rural and agrarian societies to predominantly urban and industrial ones. In its different instantiations and forms, the agrarian novel devised the contours of a new social world coming into being and imagined which further movements might take place. By the 1970s, however, the agrarian world had ceased to be the anchor of the Latin American novel. Moreover, the transitions that earlier novels had brought into view were becoming largely invisible, as the novel re-established its center of gravity in cities, thereby severing a connection to an immediate agrarian past. There are, of course, important exceptions: Manuel Scorza's pentalogy *La guerra silenciosa* (*The Silent War*, 1970–82), which focused on indigenous resistance to mining operations in the Cerro de Pasco region of Peru, comes to mind; so too does Manlio Angueta's testimonial novel *Un día en la vida* (*A Day in the Life*, 1980), focused on peasant revolutionary struggle in El Salvador. For the most part, though, Latin American novels began to occupy themselves with cities that no longer retained visible links to the

agrarian transitions that produced them. This is the case, for example, in important novels like Fernando del Paso's *Palinuro de México* (1977), a sprawling and polyphonic modernist epic centered around a plaza in Mexico City.[1] Unlike Carlos Fuentes's *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, this novel is not explicitly concerned with plotting how previous agrarian transitions brought contemporary Mexico City into being. Similarly, Diamela Eltit's *Lumpérica* (1983), an experimental novel written during the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, is set among indigents in a city plaza, surveilled by streetlamps; in contrast with José Donoso's *The Obscene Bird of Night*, however, a longer historical narrative connecting the urban present to the agrarian past is no longer visible. This observation, I want to be clear, is not meant to diminish the aesthetic value of such works, which are without doubt extraordinary, but merely to indicate a shift in historical standpoint. In rather matter-of-fact terms, what is available in one moment —in this case, agrarian transition—recedes in the next.

Laments or celebrations of the end of the agrarian novel are therefore somewhat misplaced. As an example, 1990s literary currents such as the transnational "McOndo" (a cheeky play on García Márquez's "Macondo" in the era of McDonald's) and the Mexican "Crack" (a Spanish transliteration of "crash" that emerged in opposition to the earlier "boom") heralded a new era of urban literature. As the Chilean proponent of McOndo Alberto Fuguet wrote, Latin American writers were finally abandoning "the jungle" for "skyscrapers," and, as a corollary, leaving the "collective sagas" of the past for "individual and private realities."[2] Indeed, the Latin American novel *was* becoming more urban and more concerned with individual experience in the 1990s. But this was no mere choice on the part of the cosmopolitan Latin American author, who by some force of will had been able finally to relinquish both regional and collective concerns. On a more basic level, it was an expression of the fact that the countryside that the agrarian novel brought into view no longer existed as such.

This disappearance was consolidated in the wake of another epochal shift from the 1970s onward, one familiar to us today under the rubric of neoliberalism. The hallmark features of this transition, whose origins lie in a worldwide realignment of accumulation in the 1970s, are well known, and extend from the defeat of revolutionary projects by way of military dictatorships to the abandonment of an earlier model of state-led development and embrace of "free" markets. The piece of the historical

puzzle I wish to highlight here is the extent to which decades-spanning agrarian transitions laid the groundwork for the incorporation of agriculture into a new regime of accumulation. Perversely, ambitious state-led land reform programs often laid the groundwork for the reconcentration of private property in the neoliberal era. This reconcentration did not return land to the old latifundio system but created a flexible system of property ownership that facilitated accumulation in the agrarian sector. This is what occurred, for example, in the 1970s under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile, when reconcentrated properties became incorporated into transnational agribusiness.[3] In Mexico in the 1980s and 1990s, recurring debt crises pushed peasants into deeper immiseration, sparking mass migration to the US. The passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, in turn, resulted in what had previously been unthinkable: the dismantling of the ejido sector to allow for private land ownership and capital investment. As the Mexican undersecretary of agriculture predicted rather matter of factly at the time, around half of the remaining peasantry would have to move in the next decade or two, though he did not specify where.[4] A US secretary of agriculture in the 1980s noted that "the idea that developing countries should feed themselves is an anachronism from a bygone era."[5] Instead, countries should rely on whichever entity could produce food most cheaply and efficiently: Heavily subsidized and industrially produced US corn, for example, could be exported to Latin America, while Latin America might supply off-season fruits and vegetables to Northern tables. In a return of sorts to a nineteenth-century export model, Latin American agriculture once again became oriented toward foreign markets, though with two major differences: First, by the 1980s and 1990s the majority of the population no longer retained access to subsistence, meaning that each subsequent crisis of accumulation would occur within largely wage-dependent populations; and, second, the near-total subsumption of agriculture itself to the capitalist mode of production. Green Revolution technologies, pioneered in Latin America since the 1940s as a means of making peasant agricultures more productive, came to fruition in the 1990s in the hands of transnational agribusiness, in the form of proprietary hybrid seeds and pesticides. Since the 1990s, increasing productivity in agriculture has meant that more food can be grown on less land, using less labor. As Aaron Benanav notes, "Agriculture fully industrialized, for the first time in the history of capitalism"; this,

combined with demographic expansion, pushed the world's remaining peasantries out of agriculture, resulting in a global surplus population of vast proportions.[6] At the same time, as Jason Moore has shown, the "real subsumption" of agriculture into the capitalist mode of production is driving ecological depletion and crisis on an unprecedented scale, with no end in sight.[7] With these transformations, the classic twentieth-century agrarian question—in Kautsky's formulation, how and whether capitalism might take hold of agriculture—has been resolved in favor of capital, at least until further notice.

The closure of the agrarian question, and not mere stylistic choice, then, guides the simultaneous urbanization and privatization of the Latin American novel in the contemporary era. As noted in the introduction, Latin America is today, according to UN statistics, the most urban region of the planet. Notwithstanding the continued existence of cultivators in many parts of the region, there is no longer an agrarian sector that serves as a bulwark against the advances of capital within the overall social metabolism. This means that all novels of the contemporary period are, in a certain sense, post-agrarian. This is true when novels take place in cities, as do a preponderance of works from the period after 1970, but also when they take place in (what used to be) the countryside. The perspectives that once grounded the agrarian novel—most notably, those of landowners and peasants experiencing some sort of transition—no longer exist, because the twentieth-century "roads" they traveled along have come to an end. In similar fashion, the key aesthetic modes developed to evoke transition—among them, gothic narratives of landed decline, epics of peasant freedom, modernist anti-epics of peasant immiseration, and boom-era experiments in urban mapping—can no longer operate as they once did, because those transitions have birthed a completely new era.

As a corollary, the sense of tumult and upheaval that enlivened the twentieth-century agrarian novel is, for the most part, no longer available to contemporary Latin American writers. None of this is to say, of course, that novels are no longer able to cognitively map the present; the conditions under which they do so, however, have irrevocably changed. Nor is it to say, contra post-critical apparatuses, that the contemporary novel is unable to reveal new knowledge about the structural lineaments of capitalism. A different book would have to be written to account for how recent Latin American novels might devise a new set of transitions unfolding within the

post-agrarian order.[8] As a manner of concluding this study, though, I would like to gesture toward what such an analysis might look like. For this, I turn to two particularly suggestive examples of the post-agrarian novel's reinvention of a relationship to the countryside, or, rather, what's left of it in the contemporary period: Samanta Schweblin's acclaimed *Distancia de rescate* (*Fever Dream*), a horror novel set amid the pesticide-drenched soy fields of Argentina that since the 1990s have overtaken most of the country's arable land; and the Mexican author Fernanda Melchor's equally celebrated *Temporada de huracanes* (*Hurricane Season*) a modernist-inflected crime novel that examines the murder of a transgender woman in rural Veracruz. (Both novels were recently adapted into films by Netflix.) Taken together, these two novels provide insights into the twin faces of contemporary post-agrarian societies in Latin America: in *Fever Dream*, the huge swathes of depopulated land given over to factory farming and global agribusiness; and, in *Hurricane Season*, the equally vast zones of social sacrifice to which a consolidated surplus population has been consigned. In keeping with the staggering inequalities produced by this system, the chosen novels also provide access to the two main class perspectives available to post-agrarian fiction today: in the case of Schweblin, that of an urban middle-class consumer; and in the case of Melchor, that of a post-peasantry structurally redundant to the functioning of capital.

Micro-Distances in the Global Food System

As noted above, the Latin American novel increasingly gravitated toward the urban world from the 1970s onward, marking the end of a decades-spanning engagement with the classic agrarian question. From the 2000s onward, however, the retrenchment of agro-export regimes has sparked a renewed engagement with the countryside on the part of the novel, albeit in a wholly different incarnation. Such novels include Lina Meruane's novel *Fruta podrida* (Rotten fruit, 2007), a novel that explores Chilean fruit export installations from the perspective of a diabetic woman surrounded by sugar, and Juan Cárdenas's *El diablo de las provincias* (*The Devil of the Provinces*, 2018), a conspiracy detective narrative set amid palm oil plantations in Colombia. Paradoxically, perhaps, the return to the countryside has been particularly pronounced in Argentina, a country whose

literature had since the 1930s largely gravitated toward industrial urban life (one reason it does not figure beyond the first chapter of this book). But in the first decades of the twenty-first century, particularly in the aftermath of the 2001 financial crisis, Argentine novelists have turned back to the countryside to found what Lucía de Leone terms a "new rural narrative."[9] This new rural narrative, while in some sense resembling earlier inquiries into Argentina's export model, proceeds along completely new lines. Gone are the nineteenth-century estancias, and in their place stretch massive soy fields operated by transnational agribusiness firms like Cargill and Bunge. The landed perspective that guided nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction is also gone, replaced by the middle-class urban perspective that has long dominated Argentine cultural production.

The encounter between a default urban middle-class perspective and the new countryside is central to Schweblin's *Fever Dream*, a horror novel that is perhaps the best-known example of the new rural narrative. In it, a bourgeois urban mother travels from the capital to the countryside in search of rest and relaxation. Instead, she encounters toxic agro-implements that kill her and entrap her small daughter's soul in another person's body. The entire novel takes the form of a disorienting, possibly silent dialogue between the mother, Amanda, and a boy, David, the son of a local woman with whom Amanda had struck up a friendship on her vacation. Over the course of this dialogue, David urges Amanda to remember the small details that brought her to this moment, details that gradually reveal the contours of a larger story. Years earlier, David had been poisoned by water from a creek; his mother, Carla, desperate to save him, took him to a local healer, the "woman in the green house," who was able to save him at the cost of transmigrating his soul to another body. In the present, Carla tells this story to Amanda, who, deeply unsettled, resolves to leave for the city. Yet, in a manner consistent with horror genres, Amanda fatally delays her departure by going to see Carla at the soy company where she works as a bookkeeper. There, Amanda's daughter Nina sits on what she thinks is dewy grass, but in fact turns out to be a toxic glyphosate pesticide, occasioning another visit to the woman in the green house, this time to cure Nina. As Amanda dies from poisoning in a hospital, she sees her husband return to the countryside to discover what happened to Nina, who now exhibits the mannerisms of David. The boy's soul, we are led to believe, is now occupying the girl's body.

Fever Dream powerfully evokes the cascading and devastating contradictions of contemporary agro-industry, as capital attempts—and fails—to conquer nature itself. As I want to explore here, the horror generated by the novel is also embedded in the abstraction and mystery called forth by the global food system. Since the 1990s, but especially after the financial crisis of 2001, Argentine agriculture—the greater part of which is dedicated to soy export production—has been irrevocably altered by capital-intensive processes of mechanization and proprietary agricultural inputs such as genetically modified seed and pesticides. Concomitantly, transnational finance has reorganized nearly every aspect of the production process through groups of investors known as "sowing pools" (*pooles de siembra*) that raise capital, rent land from small- and medium-sized farmers, and manage planting and harvesting. The resulting agricultural system, far from anything that resembles nature, has become a rather monstrous "neo-nature."[10] Orchestrated by Wall Street and requiring ever-more powerful toxic inputs to produce its yields, the agricultural system at the center of *Fever Dream* becomes available as a site of mystery, but also outright horror.

As a tourist, Amanda entertains some fantasy of the countryside as bucolic. But it is, in fact, an extension of the city, which is to say, an extension of capital. The house she rents, the honey she buys at the farmer's market, the plastic toy she buys for her daughter at a big-box store, and the soy fields surrounding the town are all misleading appearances generated by what the novel presents as a single and unified commodity universe. As a bourgeois mother and consumer (which in this novel amount to the same thing), Amanda is structurally obligated to navigate that commodity universe, as a matter of both gendered social reproduction and class-inflected self-styling. Notably, after hearing about David's poisoning and soul-splitting, she and her daughter *go shopping*: "We're on vacation—that's what we're here for."[11] And while Amanda always keeps her daughter within a specific radius (the "rescue distance" referred to in the title of the Spanish version of the novel, *Distancia de rescate*), this micro-space is no match for the global food system and its lurking dangers. In the specific case of soy, it is impossible to know by just looking at it how it is produced, which financial "pools" facilitate its movement, and, not least, where its toxic inputs are embedded. The inability to cognitively map this system explains why, in an initial moment, detection is necessary: David

prods Amanda to sift through details she had previously been unable to notice, “something small and invisible that has ruined everything” (160). Dwelling on these seemingly insignificant details, *Fever Dream*’s gambit is to discover, with growing terror, the contours of a large and terrifying system.

The uncanny aspects of this system are first announced in a dream Amanda recounts to David. In it, she comes downstairs and discovers her daughter and husband sitting at the kitchen table, and in front of them a strange can of peas. In what sounds like a parody of bourgeois motherhood, Amanda notes that these peas are coarse and big, “a product I would never choose to feed my family with” (74). Her daughter Nina, meanwhile, struggles to speak, and finally squawks out that she is in fact David. This scene was, according the Schweblin, the first she conceived for the novel.[12] Indeed, it is only one step from here to arrive at the poisoned grass seeping into Nina’s shorts and, shortly afterward, her evacuation and replacement by David. In both cases, terror arises from an inability to police the boundaries of the bourgeois family unit. This failure, in turn, while experienced in moral and affective terms, is structural: The can of peas, like the agro-toxins in the grass, breaches the familial barrier whether the mother likes it or not. In spite of the mother’s belief that she can protect her daughter from within a tight “rescue distance,” she is in fact operating in a commodity system with no visible outside: The call is coming from inside the kitchen cupboard, so to speak.

And yet, this apparently closed system, stylistically reproduced in the closed dialogue between Amanda and David, does seek an outside in the form of the novel’s key supernatural device: the “woman in the green house” who, by means of a shadowy folk practice, saves poisoned children by sending their souls to other people’s bodies. The appearance of this figure is curious to say the least, especially because the novel as a whole is predicated upon the colonization of agriculture by the commodity form, and its resulting abolition of any meaningful difference between countryside and city. As an extension of the crisis of cognitive mapping evinced by the novel’s structurally limited consumer perspective, the text is unable to produce any historical account of how the system came into being. The woman in the green house figures as a displaced figure in this history insofar as she seems to hail from some agrarian realm as yet uncolonized by capital: Her name corresponds to an oral register belonging to some

unspecified previous order, just as her expanded progeny—seven sons—corresponds to a social organization anterior to the compact bourgeois family that occupies the center of the novel. On the surface, this scenario resonates with the popular registers of magic and/or myth that appear in earlier agrarian novels. But in contrast with, say, the Foxes that come to life on the factory floor in Arguedas's *The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below*, considered in the previous chapter, the healer in *Fever Dream* reveals no organic relation to any agrarian community, living or dead. Instead, in a manner consistent with contemporary horror, her archaic-seeming qualities spring from *within* the hypercommodified landscape itself. Along these lines, the fantastical green house is literally submerged into the blinding greenery of the soy complex. The smallest property on the road, the green house is surrounded by soy fields; inside, a photograph on the wall shows the woman's seven sons "smiling and leaning on their rakes, and behind them was the big soy field, recently cut" (34). The green house is, in this respect, nothing other than the house of transnational soy. The earlier transitions that produced this situation, however, are invisible, either because they took place long ago or because their very erasure heightens the perception of abstraction governing the resulting system.

On the one hand, the perspective of the consumer-mother in Schweblin's novel is illuminating to the extent that it identifies a shadowy system as a site of unknowable horror; on the other, it is limited by an inability to gesture toward any periodizing principle that might locate the origins of this system, much less any kind of social movement—past or present—that might intervene in it. This is a problem by no means unique to Schweblin's novel; instead, it attests the generalized difficulty of periodizing an era in which the commodity form has exerted its influence over all aspects of social life, a condition famously diagnosed by Fredric Jameson under the rubric of postmodernism. At the same time, as we might gather from Jameson's own commitment to carefully periodizing the different cultural logics that emerge across different sites of the world-system, Schweblin's novel continues to exert meaningful difference with respect to the Northern authors most often associated with postmodernism. This is apparent, at the very least, in the novel's deployment of a single export commodity—in this case, soy—as the mysterious element organizing social experience in contemporary Argentina. It is here, perhaps, that a longer history of capitalism becomes most apprehensible in Schweblin's novel, even as we

are left with little sense of how the new and terrifying phase it evokes came into being.

After the Landslide

In some sense, an inability to historicize the countryside is baked into the middle-class consumer perspective at the center of Schweblin's *Fever Dream*. Turning to a second perspective offered by the contemporary post-agrarian novel, though, that of a post-peasantry, we can see that the periodizing verve of the twentieth-century agrarian novel has not completely disappeared. It emerges with some clarity, for example, in Melchor's *Hurricane Season*. In line with much contemporary Mexican fiction, Melchor's novel takes as its point of departure a generalized climate of violence and privation, marked by extreme poverty, forced migration, and mass murder; since 2006, over 400,000 people have been killed by state and para-state actors in the context of the so-called war on drugs. The Mexican novel has been an important chronicler of the ongoing social collapse that has unfolded across the country, but especially in rural zones. At times, as in the case of Schweblin, these novels are able to evoke the shadowy structure of global capitalism even as the history that produced this structure remains absent. This, I would argue, is true of an author like Yuri Herrera, whose novels *Los trabajos del reino* (*Kingdom Cons*, 2004) and *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* (*Signs Preceding the End of the World*, 2009) evoke circuits of drug trafficking and forced migration, respectively, while their spare lyricism remains relatively unconcerned with gesturing toward the prehistory of this decentered, present-saturated social universe. Beyond Mexico, crime genres have registered rural violence in Peru, where war between the Maoist Shining Path and the state in the 1980s killed tens of thousands of people in Ayacucho (the same region José María Arguedas wrote about decades earlier). For the most part, however, novels such as Santiago Roncagliolo's *April rojo* (*Red April*, 2006) mimic the disorienting quality of this violence, without recourse to a longer history of, among other factors, the disintegration of the hacienda system, the contradictions of agrarian reform, and ongoing rural immiseration.

Melchor's *Hurricane Season* takes a different route, since it self-consciously attempts to locate the roots of contemporary social catastrophe

in Mexico in a specific history of agrarian decay. Inspired by a story that came out in Mexico's grisly crime press, the novel focuses on the murder of the Witch (*la Bruja*), a trans woman who provided folk-remedy abortions to local women and reportedly held orgies in her decrepit mansion. The novel opens as a group of underwear-clad boys discover the Witch's dead body in a canal. Her life and death, in turn, open onto a larger story of the fictional town of La Matosa in Veracruz. Squeezed between oil installations and sugar plantations, La Matosa is nonetheless a desperately poor town in one of Mexico's poorest states. In contrast with the titular character of Carlos Fuentes's *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, who was born on an estate in this same state but rose to become a Mexico City capitalist, the inhabitants of La Matosa belong exclusively to the ranks of a post-peasant surplus population, with scant hope of social mobility.

The voices of this post-peasant population animate most of the chapters of *Hurricane Season*, which, in addition to providing clues about the Witch's murder, provide a kaleidoscopic window onto daily life in La Matosa. These perspectives include those of Luismi, an Afro-descended adolescent who has sex with the Witch and later kills her; Luismi's cousin Yesenia, who sees him arrive home, drugged and bedraggled, the day of her murder; Luismi's disabled stepfather Munra, who lends his truck to dump the Witch's body; Luismi's fourteen-year-old girlfriend, Norma, who, pregnant after being raped by her stepfather, seeks an abortion from the Witch; and Luismi's friend Brando, whose plan to kill the Witch is as much an expression of transphobic misogyny as an attempt to get money for a bus ticket to Cancún, where he dreams of finding work. The prose that unfolds to relate these experiences is dense and thicket-like (or, as some have noted, hurricane-like), with sentences that stretch out over the length of a page, and chapters that take the form of a single, uninterrupted paragraph of colloquial prose. While at first disorienting, the prose soon acquires a rhythmic, almost musical quality. As an example, we can turn to a single sentence in which Yesenia muses about her grandmother's blind preference for Luismi and misplaced rage toward herself:

> Yesenia could vouch for it, she'd seen it with her own eyes and there weren't enough fingers on her hands to count the number of times she'd had to haul the kid out of those places, because the stupid prick hadn't come home for days and Yesenia had run out of excuses, and in the end those fucking bigmouthed Güera sisters would always turn up to tell Grandma what people in town were saying about the boy, even though Grandma always denied it, dismissed it as rumor, her grandson wasn't involved in anything of the kind, he was in Gutiérrez de la Torre

> for the lemon harvest, all that talk about how he spent his days in the Witch's house was a load of bullshit, hot air from bitter neighbors who had nothing better to do than go around spinning yarns, and back then Yesenia would keep quiet, she wouldn't dare tell Grandma the truth; what she'd seen with her own eyes and what the Güeras went around telling anyone who'd listen; but also what Auntie Balbi had predicted all along, ever since Grandma took that filthy runt in; he'll turn out like Maurilio, or worse, because people said some pretty nasty shit about Uncle Maurilio: that he was a dickhead, that he was a dumb shit who sponged off his woman, and that later in life he fell into drugs, and they even said that's how he caught the disease that ended up sucking the life out of him, but at least he never earned a name for himself among the local rent boys [*maricones del pueblo*], nor did he spend every waking hour at the Witch's house, at the orgies that went on there, which Yesenia had seen with her own eyes one night, that night, the night Grandma took the poultry shears to her hair and sent her out to sleep in the yard, like the mongrel bitch that she was, Grandma told her.[13]

Here and elsewhere, the narrative perspective is limited to a single character, whose internal monologue swirls around a series of quotidian events: the death of Yesenia's Uncle Maurilio from AIDS, her neighbor's nosy intrusiveness, and her grandmother's insistence that Luismi was working the lemon harvest and not having sex with men. The perspective is at once atomized and densely social. On the one side, Yesenia's voice expresses a solitary existence that is expressed on levels of content (mistreatment by her grandmother) and form (a chapter in which she is literally alone with her thoughts). At the same time, the details revealed in her musings transmit a sense of the social conditions that entrap residents of La Matosa. Extreme poverty reigns in this world, to be sure; but, as we can gauge from the recursive and repetitive temporality of the prose, characters exist in a state of forced idleness and boredom. The strains of Yesenia and other characters' voices, we might say, correspond with the immiserated social state Michael Denning has named "wageless life."[14] This state of stasis, in which nothing seems poised to change, is punctuated only by concrete acts of gendered violence that range from a grandmother beating her granddaughter with poultry shears to the brutal murder at the center of the novel.

Melchor's recourse to recursiveness and temporal concentration reveal the modernist lineage of her style; the author herself notes Gabriel García Márquez's *El otoño del patriarca* (*The Autumn of the Patriarch*, 1975) as inspiration for the dense, single-paragraph chapters. Beyond this, the frozen present in *Hurricane Season* bears similarity to the temporality evoked in the anti-epics of peasant immiseration studied in chapter 4. Jose Donoso's *Hell Has No Limits*, which similarly revolved around the murder of a queer

person (in this case, the *loca* performer Manuela) in an immiserated rural town, is a clear site of inspiration for Melchor. While perhaps less overt, the individual voices deployed in the chapters of *Hurricane Season* resemble those of peasants in Juan Rulfo's *The Burning Plain* in their atomization, albeit in a more loquacious register. Melchor's most powerful site of engagement with these anti-epics, though, hails from her deployment of analepsis as a means of locating the origins of the frozen present in a relatively more dynamic past. To this end, the second chapter of *Hurricane Season* narrates the recent history of La Matosa: "They called her the Witch, the same as her mother; the Young Witch when she'd first started trading in curses and cures, and then, when she wound up alone, the year of the landslide, simply the Witch" (5). In contrast with the first-person narratives that dominate the novel, this chapter employs a register of gossip, a degraded expression of collectivity, to relate the prehistory of La Matosa's present-day stagnation and ruin. Decades earlier, probably sometime in the 1960s, the Witch's mother had become mistress to a decadent landowner who had sold his family's cane fields, living off the rents from his remaining lands. After his death, the landowner's legitimate sons try to take the house from her. The sons are mysteriously killed, however, in a car accident on their way to their father's funeral, impaled by metal rods flying from a flatbed truck. After this, rumors begin to fly that the Witch has dark powers: "It was … around that time that the locals began seeing flying creatures at night" (8);

> it was around then, too, that the rumor about the statue began, a statue that the Witch kept hidden somewhere in that house … and where it's said she fornicated with it behind closed doors, with this statue that was in fact a giant model of the devil. (9)

Meanwhile, the Witch's daughter, known only as "the Girl," takes up her mother's trade, supplying potions and herbal abortions to women in town.

The year of the landslide changes everything, though, in what appears as an epochal shift: During the hurricane season of 1978, the Witch dies, transforming the Girl—unclearly gendered and rumored to be the spawn of the devil—into her successor. The relevance of the story reaches far beyond these two women, however, to transmit a collective story that remains alive in popular memory: The landslide destroys La Matosa's animals, corrals, and fields and drives its peasant inhabitants to seek refuge in nearby towns. The people who return in the aftermath of the landslide are "outsiders" (18),

and while they too have a peasant past, they are no longer peasants. Instead, they arrive attracted by the promise of a highway that will connect a newly discovered oil installation to the port. This created

> enough work for *fondas* and food stalls to start cropping up, and in time even cantinas, guesthouses, whorehouses and strip clubs where the truckers, the traveling tradesmen and the day laborers would stop to take a moment from the monotony of that road flanked on either side by cane fields, cane and pastures and reeds filling every inch of land for miles and miles, in every direction … (18)

With oil on one side and sugar plantations on the other, the new population ekes out an existence between them. This includes cane cutters "recently admitted to starvation wages," roadside cooks, and sex workers so poor the Witch helps them for free because they "didn't own so much as the towels they used to wipe away the bodily fluids of the men who screwed them" (23, translation modified).

What makes the novel's vision of social totality most compelling is its periodization of the entry of peasants into an immiserated class of wage laborers and, even more frequently, irregular informal work, with little hope of exiting this condition. Not coincidentally, the landslide of 1978 occurs at the height of a Mexican oil boom that would come to a definitive end in 1982, the year of the devastating financial crisis that would push the country toward a neoliberal program of austerity, financialization, and de-development. In this moment, which the German social theorist Robert Kurz has discussed more broadly as "the collapse of modernization," people in La Matosa join the ranks of the proletariat at the same moment in which their labor becomes structurally redundant to the accumulation of capital on a systemic, world scale. The creation of surplus populations is not a new phenomenon; today, however, under conditions of systemic crisis and low growth across all sectors of an integrated world economy, the ranks of this class have swelled to unprecedented proportions, with seemingly little hope of exiting that condition. The shock absorbers of previous eras—access to subsistence farming or migration to more economically dynamic locales—have to a large extent been eliminated. Separated from subsistence but also denied access to a regular wage, people in La Matosa suddenly become what Kurz terms "monetary subjects without money," or people who depend for survival on commodities they don't have the means to buy.[15] Battered by this "landslide"—as good a metaphor for contemporary

capitalism as any—they are forced to make their way amid the precious little that's left.

In one sense, the collapse of modernization set in the 1970s makes future historical movement difficult to detect in *Hurricane Season*. This is, at least, the impression we get from the novel's evocation of a present that seems motionless and bleak. And yet, at the very least, Melchor's attempt to redeploy a transitional aesthetic mode in the post-catastrophic present points to degraded, though still available, possibilities for thinking epochally and historically by way of the novel. *Hurricane Season* is fatalistic in that that none of its characters seems able to escape their fate. And yet, I would insist that there is something mildly utopian in pointing out that this calamity has historical, which is to say social, origins. And if the gossipy strains reverberating throughout Melchor's novel already presume a failure of collective action, the past it evokes is a necessary starting point for thinking about how something different might someday emerge from its ruinous landscapes.

Notes

Introduction: Agrarian Questions, Novel Answers

1 José María Arguedas, *The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below*, trans. Frances Horning Barraclough (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 120.

2 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Vintage, 1977), 873.

3 Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (Verso, 2006).

4 UN-Habitat, *The State of Latin American and Caribbean Cities 2012: Towards a New Urban Transition* (Nairobi: UN-Habitat, 2012), xi.

5 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (Vintage, 1996), 289.

6 Farshad Araghi, "Global Depeasantization, 1945–1990," *Sociological Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1995): 337–68; Aaron Benanav, "A History of Separation," *Endnotes* 4 (2015): 70–85.

7 José María Arguedas, "The Novel and the Problem of Literary Expression in Peru," in *Yawar Fiesta*, trans. Frances Horning Barraclough (Waveland Press, 1985), xv, emphasis added.

8 Juan Marinello, "Treinta años después: Notas sobre la novela latinoamericana," *Recopilación de textos sobre tres novelas ejemplares* (Casa de las Américas, 1971), 58.

9 Here we might think of the mid-twentieth-century Uruguayan critic Emir Rodríguez Monegal's derision of "epics about peasants" for their "completely mechanistic 'documentary' style" (*Obra selecta* [Biblioteca Ayacucho, 2003], 239, my translation); or the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa's characterization of Jose Maria Arguedas's depictions of indigenous agrarian communes as an "archaic utopia" (*La utopía arcaica* [Punto de lectura, 2011]).

10 Ángel Rama, *Writing Across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America*, trans. David Frye (Duke University Press, 2012), 83. Rama borrows his notion of transculturation from the mid-twentieth-century Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz.

11 In a related vein, Neil Larsen has pointed out that theories of transculturation presume that social antagonisms can be solved on the plane of culture, when in fact their solutions "must be social, historical—and ultimately political." *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative, and Nation in the Americas* (Verso, 2001), 139. This is true, I would aver, of a subsequent wave of poststructuralist, deconstructionist, and subalternist critiques in the 1990s and 2000s that rejected Rama's implicitly nationalist premise of reconciliation but continued to focus their interventions on culture and language to the general exclusion of material forces.

12 Karl Kautsky, *The Agrarian Question*, trans. P. Burgess (Zwan Publications, 1899), 12, emphasis in the original.

13 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 876. For a discussion of the relevance of Marx's expansion of his notion of primitive accumulation in the French edition of *Capital*, see Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity and Non-Western Societies* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), chapter 5.

14 As the Brazilian dependency theorist Ruy Mauro Marini argues, European industrialization was in some ways made possible by the outsourcing of food production to Latin America: "The rapid growth of the industrial working class and, in general, of the urban population employed in industry and services … could not have taken place without relying on means of subsistence of farm origin that were provided in large measure by Latin American countries." *The Dialectics of Dependency* (Monthly Review Press, 2022), 123.

15 One notable exception is Haiti, where, between 1791 and 1804, enslaved people waged a world-historic revolution to emancipate themselves from slavery and destroy the sugar plantation complex. Across much of Latin America and the Caribbean, however, forced labor regimes and large estates persisted well into the twentieth century.

16 The Ecuadorian Marxist sociologist Agustín Cueva, for example, notes that even as structures of enslavement and servitude were adapted to meet the needs of accumulation, they were "characterized by extremely low levels of development of the productive forces, and by social relations of production based in slavery and servitude, which constituted a handicap, to put it mildly, for the later development of our societies." *El desarrollo del capitalismo en América Latina* (Siglo XXI, 1977), 15 (my translation).

17 Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (Routledge, 2003).

18 Some examples include Fernando González Roa and José Covarrubias, *El problema rural de México* (1917); Pedro Aguirre Cerda, *El problema agrario* (Chile, 1929); and Miguel Acosta Saignes, *El latifundio* (Venezuela, 1938).

19 W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge University Press, 1990 [1960]).

20 In broad terms, the modes of production debate in Latin America was sparked by the emergence of dependency theory in the 1960s. To name but one memorable instance of this debate, the German American theorist Andre Gunder Frank rejected stagist theories of economic growth to contend that capitalism had been present in the Latin American countryside since the sixteenth century: While appearing feudal, the social forms spawned by colonialism and imperialism were in fact outgrowths of capitalism ("The Development of Underdevelopment," *Monthly Review* 18, no. 4 [1966]: 17–31). The Argentine Marxist Ernesto Laclau countered that Frank had confused matters by abandoning wage labor as the sine qua non of the capitalist mode of production: So long as coerced labor prevailed, these societies could not be considered fully capitalist ("Feudalism and Capitalism in Latin America," *New Left Review* 67 [1971]:19–38). In hindsight, Frank was correct that coerced labor and other forms of underdevelopment were direct creations of capitalism in peripheral societies. Laclau, in turn, was correct that societies organized around coerced labor functioned in a completely different manner from those organized around wage labor; the key would be to integrate an analysis of colonial underdevelopment with the emergence of a specifically capitalist mode of production in the Latin American countryside. Such a synthesis is pursued, for example, in Alain de Janvry, *The Agrarian Question and Reformism in Latin America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), and Roger Bartra, *Agrarian Structure and Political Power in Mexico* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

21 Eric Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1999 [1969]).

22 Ericka Beckman, *Capital Fictions: The Literature of Latin America's Export Age* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

23 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford University Press, 1973), 297.

24 Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (University of Nebraska Press, 1983 [1937]), 144.

25 Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (Verso, 2013), 271.

26 Lenin first outlined these two paths in *The Agrarian Programme of Social-Democracy in the First Russian Revolution, 1905–1907* (1908). Lenin's early distinction between a "farmer" and "Junker" road or path has had wide influence in Marxian approaches to the agrarian question, particularly in Latin America, where it has been amplified and modified to analyze diverse contexts. Beyond Marxist circles, Barrington Moore's 1966 *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* refashioned Lenin's paths from an explicitly anti-Marxist standpoint to explain the rise of fascism in Japan and Germany and warn of the risk of peasant revolution in poor countries.

27 Antonio Candido, "Literature and Underdevelopment," in *Antonio Candido: On Literature and Society* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 137.

28 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Cornell University Press, 1981), 148.

29 Jean Franco, "Dependency Theory and Literary History: The Case of Latin America," *Minnesota Review* 5, no. 1 (1975): 66.

30 Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," *Savacou* 5 (1971): 95–102.

31 Roberto Schwarz, "The Importing of the Novel to Brazil and Its Contradictions in the Work of Alencar," in *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, ed. John Gledson (Verso, 1992), 44.

32 Roberto Schwarz, "Objective Form: Reflections on the Dialectics of Roguery," in *Two Girls and Other Essays*, trans. Francis Mulhern (Verso, 2012), 10.

33 I use the terms *peasant* and *peasantry* throughout this book to designate a class of small agricultural producers, often oppressed by large landowners, who retain some access to means of subsistence. The negative connotations attached to the term *peasant*, together with its strong association with feudal Europe, have led some to prefer terms like *farmer* or *campesino*, the Spanish word for "peasant." The term *farmer*, however, frequently presumes a property owner operating according to market imperatives: Such is the case, for example, of the English tenant farmers that formed the basis of an English agrarian bourgeoisie analyzed by Marx, or the smallholders in settler colonies analyzed by Lenin, arrangements that did not predominate in Latin America during the period studied. The meaning of the term *campesino*, beyond designating a Latin American origin, does not differ significantly from the French-derived term *peasant*: Both words literally mean "someone from the countryside." I have thus retained *peasant* as a specific class category that transcends Latin American contexts while admitting local specificity along lines of specific social arrangements (such as indigenous agrarian communes, sharecropping, and independent smallholders).

34 Williams, *The Country and the City*, 301.

1 Whither the Latifundio? Landowner Romance

1 Rómulo Gallegos, *Doña Bárbara*, trans. Robert Malloy (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 3. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically.

2 Spanish American modernismo, a late nineteenth-century Parnassian-inspired current, should be distinguished from the Anglo-American current widely known as modernism, as well as from the 1920s avant-garde movement known as Brazilian modernismo, in spite of their overt concern with the concept of modernity.

3 Carlos Alonso, *The Spanish American Regional Novel: Modernity and Autochthony* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

4 Several regionalist works from Chile revolve around a landowner and his estate, including Rafael Maluenda Labarca, *Escenas de la vida campesina* (1909), Latorre, *Cuentos del Maule* (1912), and Federico Gana, *Días de campo* (1916). See Patrick Barr-Melej, *Reforming Chile: Cultural Politics, Nationalism and the Making of the Middle Class* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

5 Antonio Candido, "Literature and Underdevelopment," in *Antonio Candido: On Literature and Society* (Princeton University Press, 1995), 137.

6 "The ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance, where the virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines represent the ideals and the villains the threats to their ascendancy." Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 186.

7 Quoted in Ivonne Bordelois, *Genio y figura de Ricardo Güiraldes* (Eudeba, 1966), 147.

8 Ricardo Güiraldes, *Don Segundo Sombra* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 4. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically.

9 Sarmiento's critique of the large estate as barbaric is waged in *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie* (1845). His travel writings on the United States idealize that country's smallholders. See Domingo F. Sarmiento, *Viajes por Europa, África, y América 1845–1847* (Stockcero, 2003).

10 In broad terms, the history of the large estate stretches back to the period of the conquest, when the *encomienda* system granted Spanish settlers the right to extract labor and tribute from indigenous inhabitants, but not land ownership itself. The encomienda was gradually replaced by land grants (*mercedes de tierra*) that transformed communal indigenous lands into private property, giving rise to the hacienda system. Haciendas, often formed as ancillaries to the colonial mining economy, relied upon forced labor rents of indigenous population. Coastal plantations, in turn, relied upon enslaved African labor.

11 José Hernández, *Instrucción del estanciero* (Imprenta y Librería de Mayo, 1884), 7.

12 Roy Hora, "El problema del latifundio," in *La Argentina como problema: Temas, visions y pasiones del siglo XX*, ed. Carlos Altamirano and Adrián Gorelik (Siglos XXI, 2019), ebook, my translation.

13 Ricardo Güiraldes, *Raucho* (Espasa-Calpe, 1932 [1917]), 254. All translations are my own. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically.

14 Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (University of California Press, 1991).

15 Quoted in Beatriz Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica* (Ediciones Nueva Visión, 1989), 36.

16 Ibid., 38.

17 Alonso, *Regional Novel*, 75.

18 Quoted in ibid., 88.

19 David Viñas, *Literatura argentina y realidad política: De Sarmiento a Cortázar* (Jorge Alvarez Editor, 1970), 242, my translation.

20 If Güiraldes didn't learn about this mechanism from Dickens, he might have learned it from earlier, English-inflected Argentine melodrama. Here it is germane to recognize that the ending of *Don Segundo Sombra* resembles Juana Manuela Gorriti's *Oasis en la vida* (*An Oasis in Life*, 1888), whose most memorable feature is that it was written at the behest of an English insurance company as a Christmas gift for its employees. The novel ends when an impoverished but virtuous writer learns that he is the beneficiary of a life insurance policy issued by the same company. The melodramatic resolution is much more scandalous in *Don Segundo Sombra*, however, because the novel pretends to be something different—an all-male spiritual journey across the plains—until it is forced to embrace the commercial forces it has seemed to reject.

21 Roberto Schwarz, "Misplaced Ideas," in *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, ed. John Gledson (Verso, 1992), 30.

22 Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (New Directions, 1986), 181.

23 Roberto Schwarz, “Objective Form: Reflections on the Dialectic of Roguery,” in *Two Girls: And Other Essays*, trans. Francis Mulhern (Verso, 2012), 18.

24 Hora, “Latifundio.”

25 During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the price of export goods fell sometimes by more than half, and the wealthiest landowners increasingly moved investment to secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy. In the 1940s, the nationalist government of Juan Perón promoted land tenure policies that favored medium-sized producers, essentially ending the latifundio without outright land reform. Roy Hora, *The Landowners of the Argentine Pampa* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 235–8.

26 Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (Verso, 2000).

27 Miguel Acosta Saignes, *El latifundio* (Fundación Editorial el Perro y la Rana, 2009 [1937]), 58.

28 John Beverly, “Venezuela,” *Handbook of Latin American Literature*, ed. David Foster (Routledge, 1992), 638.

29 Julie Skurski, “The Ambiguities of Authenticity in Latin America: Doña Bárbara and the Construction of National Identity,” *Poetics Today* 15, no. 4 (1994): 634.

30 Howard Sabin, *Gallegos y la revolución burguesa de Venezuela* (Monte Avila Editores, 1976), 123–5.

31 Quoted in Alonso, *Regional Novel*, 112.

32 Nineteenth-century Latin American romance often articulated itself through colonial contact narratives, such as in Jose de Alencar’s *Iracema* (1865) or Juana Manuela Gorriti’s *La Quena* (1851), particularly in relationships between a European man and an indigenous woman. On romance as mode of colonial contact and frontier expansion, see Michael Nibblett, *World Literature and Ecology: The Aesthetics of Commodity Frontiers, 1890–1950* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), and Stephen Knight, *A Hundred Years of Fiction* (University of Wales Press, 2004).

33 André Michalski, “*Doña Bárbara:* Un cuento de hadas,” *PMLA* 85, no. 5 (1970): 1015.

34 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cornell University Press, 1982), 144.

35 Ericka Beckman, *Capital Fictions: The Literature of Latin America’s Export Age* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), chapter 1.

36 V. I. Lenin, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (Progress Publishers 1967), 272.

37 Acosta, *El latifundio*, 90. This focus on dairy as a mode of agricultural modernization continued in a developmentalist guise with the Rockefeller Foundation’s program to develop Venezuelan agriculture in the 1940s. See Darlene Rivas, *Missionary Capitalist: Nelson Rockefeller in Venezuela* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Beyond Venezuela, socialist modernization programs also took dairy as a point of departure—as a case in point, we might think of Fidel Castro’s attempt to breed Holstein cows able to withstand tropical climates.

38 Ricardo Latcham, Ernesto Montenegro, and Manuel Vega, *El criollismo chileno* (Editorial Universitaria, 1956), 62, my translation.

39 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Autonomedia, 2004); Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (Zed Books, 2014).

40 Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* trans. Edith Bone (The Merlin Press, 1989), 162.

41 Ibid., 165.

42 Roberto Schwarz, “A Brazilian Breakthrough,” *New Left Review* 36 (November/December 2005): 107.

43 The most serious attempt to date to eliminate the latifundio in Venezuela took place in the early 2000s under the socialist government of Hugo Chávez. By 2009, some 2.7 million hectares (6.6 million acres) had been redistributed to farmer cooperatives in an effort to redress the inequalities and inefficiencies long perpetuated by the latifundio, on the one hand, and oil dependency, on the other. Christina Shiavoni and William Camacaro, “The Venezuelan Effort to Build a New Food and Agriculture System,” *Monthly Review* (July 2009), monthlyreview.org.

44 Eduardo Barrios, *Gran señor y rajadiablos* (Editorial Nascimento, 1967), 8, my translation.

2 How Are Oligarchies Unmade? Landowner Realism

1 José Lins do Rego, *Plantation Boy*, trans. Emmi Baum (Knopf, 1966), 434. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically. This volume is the first of the three volumes of Lins's sugarcane cycle (*Plantation Boy, Doidinho*, and *Bangüê*).

2 The Modern Art Week that launched Brazilian modernismo took place in São Paulo in 1922; the First Regionalist Conference of the Northeast took place in Recife in 1926.

3 Jaime Reis, "From *Bangüê* to *Usina*: Social Aspects of the Growth and Modernization in the Sugar Industry of Pernambuco, Brazil, 1850–1920," in *Land and Labor in Latin America: Essays on the Development of Agrarian Capitalism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Kenneth Duncan, Ian Rutledge, and Colin Hardin (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 371.

4 Michael Niblett, *World Literature and Ecology: The Aesthetics of Commodity Frontiers, 1890–1950* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 134.

5 The cycle is composed of *Menino de engenho* (*Plantation Boy*, 1932), *Doidinho* (1933), *Bangüê, O moleque Ricardo* (the boy Ricardo, 1935), and *Usina* (1936).

6 Quoted in Maciel Barbosa, "Entre a casa-grande e o mocambo: *O Moleque Ricardo* no ciclo da cana-de-açúcar de José Lins do Rego," *Literatura e sociedade* 20, no. 20 (2014): 20, my translation.

7 Along similar lines, Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. notes that the modernist Oswald de Andrade "practically reproduced the rhetoric of northeastern traditionalists when he praised the Northeast for being the only part of Brazil where 'capitalist machines do not noisily churn out cloth and lace and embroidery, the things we once shared and were sacred in authenticity and human beauty.' Perhaps he had absorbed a slice of Freyre." *The Invention of the Brazilian Northeast* (Duke University Press, 2014), 73.

8 Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (Verso, 2013), 272.

9 Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (University of Nebraska Press, 1983 [1937]), 84.

10 Ibid., 25

11 Roberto Schwarz, *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism: Machado De Assis*, trans. John Gledson (Duke University Press, 2001).

12 José Antonio Pasta, "Volubilidade e idéia fixa: O outro no romance brasileiro," *Sinal de menos*, no. 4 (2011): 17, my translation.

13 Other novels, to be sure, began to elaborate new literary perspectives from these rising classes. Graciliano Ramos's *São Bernardo* (1932), for example, focalizes the perspective of a farmhand in Northeastern Brazil who rises to become a landowner. Fascinatingly, as Michael Niblett shows in his reading of this novel, this perspective reprises the caprice that had once characterized the old guard. "'The Vision of These Monstrous Deformities': Rurality, Peripheral Capitalism, and Narrative Voice in Brazilian Fiction," *Transilvania* 5 (2022): 57–64. Web.

14 Reis, "From *Bangüê* to *Usina*," 371.

15 Barbosa, "Entre a casa-grande," 17, my translation.

16 José Lins do Rego, *Usina* (J. Olympio, 1940), 341, my translation.

17 While Lins's nostalgic tenor generally dissipates from Brazilian fiction, his staging of a properly bourgeois perspective guided by lordly imperatives would continue to animate Brazilian cultural production. Looking forward to Clarice Lispector's *A hora da estrela* (*The Hour of the Star*, 1977), for example, an upper-middle-class male narrator from the Northeast, now living in Rio de Janeiro, relates the tragic story of a poor migrant, also from the Northeast, with a distance that is simultaneously impersonal and godlike. It is as if a former master had continued to keep tabs on a

former dependent in the city, knowing everything about her, but bearing absolutely no responsibility for her current condition. More recently, Kleber Mendonça Filho's film *O som ao redor* (*Neighboring Sounds*, 2012) calls attention to Recife's rural past by way of an opening sequence of photos from sugar plantations, which in turn gives way to a contemporary landscape of apartment dwellers who relate to their domestic servants with an unsettling mix of familiarity and coldness. Notably, however, the film also retains contact with the gothic mode that briefly appeared in *Bangüê*. When members of the upper-middle-class family at the center of the film visit their dilapidated ancestral plantation, a waterfall briefly transforms into a torrent of blood.

18 José Lins do Rego, *Fogo morto* (J. Olympio, 1943), 101, my translation.

19 Rosario Castellanos, *Balún Canán*. While I have retained the title of the Spanish edition, all citations come from the English translation, *The Nine Guardians*, trans. Irene Nicholson (Readers International, 1992), 49. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically.

20 My understanding of labor regimes in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chiapas draws heavily from María del Carmen Legorreta Díaz's *Desafíos de la emancipación indígena: Organización señorial y modernización en Ocosingo, Chiapas, 1930–1994* (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Centro de Investigaciones Interdisciplinarias en Ciencias y Humanidades, 2008).

21 Stephen Lewis, *The Ambivalent Revolution: Forging State and Nation in Chiapas, 1910–1945* (University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 18.

22 Joshua Lund, *The Mestizo State: Reading Race in Modern Mexico* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 78.

23 Lewis, *Ambivalent Revolution*, 8.

24 In the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI), Castellanos was the director of a puppet theater that imparted didactic lessons on hygiene, agricultural technology, and literacy to Maya communities, in keeping with the modernizing aims of the Mexican state. See Carlos Navarrete Cáceres, *Rosario Castellanos: Su presencia en la antropología mexicana* (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2007), 120–5.

25 On the opposition between ladino/Indian, see Diane Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala* (University of California Press, 1999), 211.

26 The Cárdenas reforms lasted only four years, between 1936 and 1940, with much of the last two in "willful retreat." Lewis, *Ambivalent Revolution*, xv.

27 Quoted in Estelle Tarica, *The Inner Life of Mestizo Nationalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 141.

28 Richard Godden, *Fictions of Labor: William Faulkner and the South's Long Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3.

29 Ibid., 6.

30 This fear of "turning Indian" resonates with wider colonial arrangements. The anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler notes, for example, that Dutch households in Indonesia depended upon the labor of Javanese maids, which provoked anxieties over the intimacy this implied: Nursemaids, for example, were instructed to hold their charges away from their bodies to not smell of their sweat, as part of "a wider set of standards framed to ensure that European children in the colonies learned the right social cues and affiliations—and did not 'metamorphize' into Javanese." *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (University of California Press, 2010), 6.

31 María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *Indian Given: Racial Geographies Across Mexico and the United States* (Duke University Press, 2016).

32 Legorreta Díaz, *Emancipación*, 54, my translation.

33 Tarica, *Inner Life*, 176.

34 This class bargain is struck at the end of Ricardo Güiraldes's *Don Segundo Sombra*, as well as in later novels like Alfredo Bryce Echenique's *Un mundo para Julius* (*A World for Julius*, Peru, 1970) and José Emilio Pacheco's *Las batallas en el desierto* (*Battles in the Desert*, Mexico, 1981). It recurs in films such as Andrés Wood's *Machuca* (Chile, 2004) and Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá*

también (Mexico, 2001). One notable exception to this general trend is offered by the Peruvian author José María Arguedas's bildungsroman (*Deep Rivers*, 1958), which ends with the protagonist aligning himself with the indigenous community over and against his own class. This position resonates with a socialist politics that allowed Arguedas—in contradistinction with Castellanos—to transcend a landed perspective in his works.

35 Early feminist interpretations were invested in a narrative of female autonomy; see, for example, María Inés Lagos, "*Balún-Canán*: Una novela de formación de protagonista femenina," *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 50, no. 1 (1997): 159–79. In a postcolonial feminist vein, Tarica has revealed how liberal feminist readings gloss over the girl's necessary disidentification with the indigenous woman as a necessary step toward becoming a writer (*Inner Life*, 173).

36 Cynthia Steele, "María Escandón y Rosario Castellanos: Feminismo y política personal en el 'profundo sur' mexicano," *Inti: Revista de cultura hispánica* 40, no. 1 (1994): 317–25.

37 Lund, *Mestizo State*, 110–11.

38 Legorreta Díaz, *Emancipación*, 195.

39 Aaron Bobrow-Strain, *Intimate Enemies: Landowners, Power, and Violence in Chiapas* (Duke University Press, 2007), 4.

40 Ibid., 33.

3 How Do Peasants Become (Doubly) Free? The Modern Agrarian Epic

1 Mariano Azuela, *The Underdogs*, trans. Serio Waisman (Penguin, 2008). While I retain the Spanish title of the novel, all references refer to this English edition. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically.

2 Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (University of Nebraska Press, 1983 [1937]), 24.

3 Ibid., 144.

4 Roberto Schwarz, "A Brazilian Breakthrough," *New Left Review* 36 (November/December 2005): 92.

5 Gerald Martin, *Journeys Through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (Verso, 1989), 87.

6 Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, "Peripheral Realisms Now," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (September 2012): 269–88.

7 Joe Cleary, "Realism After Modernism and the Literary World-System," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (September 2012): 256.

8 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Vintage, 1977), 272.

9 Schwarz, "Brazilian Breakthrough," 92.

10 Leticia Magda Garza-Falcón, "La revolución de *Los de abajo*: Observaciones para una lectura," *Anales de literatura hispanoamericana* 19 (1990): 110.

11 Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, vol. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 96–7.

12 Portillo y Rojas's *La parcela* recounts a dispute between two Porfirian-era landowners over a parcel of land, which is resolved favorably through marriage and the law, in a manner compatible with Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara*.

13 Mariano Azuela, *Mala yerba y Esa sangre* (Fondo de cultura económica, 1971), 28.

14 Ibid., 22.

15 Arnaldo Córdova, *La ideología de la Revolución Mexicana* (Ediciones Era, 1973), 108–13.

16 Friedrich Katz, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (Stanford University Press, 1998), 524.

17 Carlos Monsiváis, “Clasismo y novela en México,” *Latin American Perspectives* 2, no. 2 (1975): 174.

18 See, for example, Luis Leal, *Mariano Azuela* (Twayne, 1971).

19 Mariano Azuela, “La novela mexicana,” in *Obras completas*, vol. 3 (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960), 1078.

20 Ignacio Sánchez Prado, “Novel, War and the Aporia of Totality: Lukács’ *Theory of the Novel* and Azuela’s *Los de abajo*,” *Mediations* (2016), mediationsjournal.org.

21 Max Parra, *Writing Pancho Villa’s Revolution: Rebels in the Literary Imagination of Mexico* (University of Texas Press, 2005), 24.

22 Richard Young, “Narrative Structure in Two Novels by Mariano Azuela: *Los caciques* and *Los de abajo*,” *Revista canadiense de estudios hispánicos* 2 (1978): 22.

23 Seymour Menton, “La estructura épica de ‘Los de abajo’ y un prólogo especulativo,” *Hispania* 50, no. 4 (1967).

24 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?,” in *Writer & Critic, and Other Essays* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1971), 112.

25 Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 19.

26 Knight, *Mexican Revolution*, 304.

27 The choice of a serrano smallholder is consistent with Azuela’s emphasis on individuals rather than communities. In his earlier novel *Mala yerba*, for example, a peon who spends time as a miner in Arizona acquires the status of heroic individual, although he is not yet able to escape the dominance of the latifundio.

28 Adolfo Gilly, *La revolución interrumpida* (Ediciones Era, 1994), 180–1.

29 Adalbert Dessau, *La novela de la Revolución Mexicana* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972), 218.

30 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (Columbia University Press, 1992).

31 Gilly, *Revolución*, 138.

32 Gilly, *Revolución*, 181, my translation.

33 Dessau, *Novela*, 222.

34 Bruno Bosteels, “Literature and Revolution in Transition: An Aesthetics of Singularity,” in *Latin American Literature in Transition 1930–1980*, ed. Amanda Holmes and Par Kumaraswami (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 275–89.

35 John Brushwood, *Mexico in Its Novel: A Nation’s Search for Identity* (University of Texas Press, 1966), 182.

36 José Carlos Mariátegui, *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*, trans. Marjory Urquidi (University of Texas Press, 2021), 33. Mariátegui founded the Peruvian Socialist Party; his thinking, however, ran afoul of the Comintern’s position in the 1920s calling for the separation of indigenous and national liberation movements, not to mention the stagism of later Stalinist orthodoxy. See Flores Galindo, *La agonía de Mariátegui* (Editorial Revolución, 1991); and Mike González, *In the Red Corner: The Marxism of José Carlos Mariátegui* (Haymarket Books, 2019).

37 Mariátegui, *Seven Interpretive Essays*, 33. Alongside the defense of the ayllu as a site of a socialist future, it is also necessary to note, if only in passing, Mariátegui’s indefensible use of racial stereotypes against Afro-Peruvian and Chinese people. As Juan de Castro notes, while such stereotypes mar his work, the overall aim of his project was to overcome European scientific racism and replace it “with a vision of human behaviour as founded on a materialist version of culture.” *Bread and Beauty: The Cultural Politics of José Carlos Mariátegui* (Brill, 2020, 86).

38 In 1881, the Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich wrote a letter to Marx to ask whether his analysis in *Capital* implied the destruction of the agrarian commune, as had occurred previously in countries such as England. Marx’s answer was a qualified “no”: His studies on the matter convinced him that “the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia. But in order that it might

function as such, the harmful influences assailing it on all sides must first be eliminated, and it must then be assured the normal conditions for spontaneous development" (marxist.org). For an analysis of Marx's thinking about the Russian commune, see Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), ch. 6.

39 Ciro Alegría et al., *Primer encuentro de narradores peruanos* (Latinoamérica Editores, 1986 [1965]), 236. Translation modified from Mike González, *Red Corner*, 121.

40 Quoted in Mauricio Ostria González, "Sobre árboles y pájaros: La polémica Arguedas-Cortázar," in *Encuentros y Desencuentros, Actas del IV Congreso Internacional del C.E.L.C.I.R.P* (Universidad de la Laguna 2002), 344.

41 Arguedas et al., *¿He vivido en vano? Mesa redonda sobre Todas las sangres* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1985), 38, 42.

42 Antonio Cornejo Polar, *Los universos narrativos de José María Arguedas* (Editorial Losada, 1973), 29.

43 In a letter to his psychiatrist, Lola Hoffman, Arguedas referred to these works as comprising a "whole cycle." José María Arguedas, John V. Murra, and Mercedes López-Baralt, *Las cartas de Arguedas* (Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 1996), 215.

44 Alberto Flores Galindo, *Dos ensayos sobre José María Arguedas* (Casa de Estudios del Socialismo Sur, 1992), 15, my translation.

45 Novels overtly concerned with mapping imperial commodity flows were not unique to Latin America. Instead, the form that Rossen Djagalov usefully names the "supply chain novel" cropped up around the world in the 1930s, as part of a distinctly socialist culture. See *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema Between the Second and the Third Worlds* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).

46 Alberto Flores Galindo, *Buscando un inca: Identidad y utopía en los Andes* (Casa de las Américas, 1986), 167.

47 José María Arguedas, "Agua," in *Relatos completos* (Losada, 1974, 81).

48 Peter Elmore, "José María Arguedas: Indigenismo and Andean Culture in Peru," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*, 2022 (web).

49 Quoted in Cornejo Polar, *Universos narrativos*, 27, my translation.

50 Though outside the scope of this chapter, a number of other authors followed a similar trajectory from an internationalist-inflected brand of socialist realism in the 1930s to a sprawling realist practice in subsequent decades. For Neil Larsen, Jorge Amado's novels from the 1940s and 1950s, dedicated to understanding the cacao enclave in Northeastern Brazil, "represent one of the greatest achievements of modern historical realism in Brazil—if not in Latin America as a whole." *Reading North by South* (University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 73. Perhaps less successfully, Jorge Icaza wrote a set of novels beginning in the 1930s that examined the disintegration of the highland hacienda system in Ecuador. This epic impulse extends into nonrealist works such as Miguel Ángel Asturias's *Men of Maize* (1949) and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), though a more rigorous analysis would be needed to ground their origins in socialist realism.

51 Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 139.

52 José María Arguedas, "The Novel and the Problem of Literary Expression in Peru," in *Yawar Fiesta*, trans. Frances Horning Barraclough (Waveland Press, 1985), xiii.

53 Ibid., xv.

54 Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), 159, 210, emphasis in the original.

55 José María Arguedas, *Yawar Fiesta*, trans. Frances Horning Barraclough (Waveland Press, 1985), 6. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically.

56 Horacio Legrás, *Literature and Subjection. The Economy of Writing and Marginality in Latin America* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 20.

57 Arguedas, "The Novel," xiii.

58 Ibid., xv.
59 Ibid., xiv.
60 Roberto Schwarz, “Misplaced Ideas,” in *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, ed. John Gledson (Verso, 1992), 27–8.
61 Cornejo Polar, *Universos narrativos*, 70.
62 Arguedas, “The Novel,” xiv.
63 Lukács, *Historical Novel*, 35.
64 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Penguin, 1993), 486–7, emphasis in the original.
65 Gavin Arnall, “The Missed Encounter of *Turupukllay*: Marxism, Indigenous Communities and Andean Culture in *Yawar Fiesta*,” *Radical Americas Journal* 5, no. 1 (2020).
66 José María Arguedas, “Puquio: A Culture in Process of Change,” in *Yawar Fiesta*, 192. It is worth noting, if only in passing, that Arguedas viewed the possibility of communal and cultural disintegration as especially pronounced in places like Puquio, where landowner domination remained strong and market expansion limited. The more dynamic social structure of the Mantaro Valley, in contrast, where members of indigenous communities were able to become small landowners, signaled for Arguedas a greater capacity for cultural adaptation and survival. See, for example, José María Arguedas, “El proceso de la sierra en el proceso de la cultura peruana,” in *Formación de una cultura nacional indoamericana* (Siglo XXI, 1975).

4 How Long Can the Peasantry Last? Anti-Epics of Rural Immiseration

1 Juan Rulfo, *The Burning Plain*, trans. Douglas J. Weatherford (University of Texas Press, 2024), 4. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically.
2 *Ejido* is the name for the indigenous communities that were broken up by liberal reforms in the nineteenth century and revived by post-revolution land reforms, though in a different form. The 1917 Constitution, under Article 27, declared land, water, and mineral rights property of the nation, opening the door to land reform. This process began slowly in the 1920s, but it was the Cárdenas presidency (1934–40) that carried out land reform on a massive scale. By 1960, the number of beneficiaries had reached 1.5 million, including over half the peasant heads of household in the country. At its height, the reform sector comprised around 40 percent of the nation’s irrigated land, mostly in the center of the country. See Rodolfo Stavenhagen, *Neolatifundismo y explotación, de Emiliano Zapata a Clayton & Co*. (Editorial Nuestro Tiempo, 1976), 25.
3 It is worth noting that a similar kind of analepsis also structures José Revueltas’s *Human Mourning*, a novel Rulfo admired, which alternates between the concentrated present of the doomed smallholders and flashbacks narrating the brief prosperity of the town after the building of a dam. Contrast, for example, the agonizing slowness of the present, in which a child’s cadaver seems to advance “one millimeter per month or per year or per century,” versus the compressed linear action narrated in a flashback: “But one day, engineers, bricklayers, mechanics, and painters began to arrive and set up shop, and the wretched village suddenly flourished. The boom lasted for some time, but then came the strike, the defeat, and finally the exodus.” *Human Mourning*, trans. Roberta Johnson (University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 31, 181.
4 Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (Verso, 2013), 8.
5 This typology resonates with Lenin’s so-called Junker and farmer roads, typified by Prussian landlords and US smallholders, respectively. The key difference with the respect to the latter in Latin

America was the predominance of a subsistence-based peasantry that never existed in settler colonies like the US.

6 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Vintage, 1977), 912.

7 Roger Bartra, *Agrarian Structure and Political Power in Mexico* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 33.

8 Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (Grove Press, 1985), 66.

9 Luis Harss, "Juan Rulfo, o la pena sin nombre," in *Los Nuestros* (Editorial Sudamericana, 1966), 305.

10 Ángel Rama, *Writing Across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America*, trans. David L. Frye (Duke University Press, 2012), 84.

11 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 876.

12 Bartra's analysis stresses the problem of ground rent in capitalist revolutions in agriculture. Following Marx's analysis of yeoman tenant farmers in England, Bartra notes that it is only when land ownership is separated from production that an agrarian entrepreneur is obliged "to give up a part of his profits" to a landowner, which in turn "compels him to generate superprofits in order to reach the average rate" (*Agrarian Structures*, 103). In Mexico, this development was blocked by the ejido system but took root in the large capitalist farms that grew alongside them.

13 Ibid., 94.

14 In the 1940s and 1950s, the Rockefeller Foundation–funded Mexican Agriculture Program (MAP) experimented with Green Revolution technologies like hybrid seeds and pesticides. While the Mexican state promoted these technologies among smallholders, they mostly benefited larger producers who could afford market inputs. See Joseph Cotter, *Troubled Harvest: Agronomy and Revolution in Mexico, 1880–2002* (Praeger, 2003), 263.

15 Bartra, *Agrarian Structures*, 135.

16 Neil Larsen, *Determinations: Essays on Theory, Narrative, and Nation in the Americas* (Verso, 2001), 139. This reading revises Larsen's earlier critique of Rulfo's modernist poetics as producing a static and fatalistic view of the peasantry in *Modernism and Hegemony* (University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

17 Tellingly, the first English translation of Rulfo's collection from 1967 begins with the story "Macario," perhaps supposing that a story with Faulknerian overtones (subjectivism in the form of a mentally disabled man) would appeal to English-speaking readers more than one dealing with land reform.

18 Juan Rulfo, *El Llano en llamas* (Cátedra, 1985), 99. Subsequent citations from the Spanish edition appear parenthetically. *Abajeños* is translated as "lowlanders" in the English edition (67).

19 Edmond Cros, "Desde la epopeya villista al sinarquismo: Análisis sociocrítico de *El Llano en llamas*," *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 22, no. 2 (1998): 215–24.

20 Carlos Blanco Aguinaga, "Introducción," in Juan Rulfo, *El Llano en llamas*, 28.

21 Héctor Mendoza Vargas, "El automóvil y los mapas de la integración del territorio mexicano, 1929–1962," *Investigaciones Geográficas, Boletín*, UNAM, 88 (2015): 91–108.

22 Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988), 348; "Modernism and Imperialism," in *The Modernist Papers* (Verso, 2016), 166.

23 Perry Anderson, "Modernity and Revolution," *New Left Review* 144 (March/April 1984): 96–113.

24 Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool University Press, 2015).

25 Norman Long and Bryan Roberts, "The Agrarian Structures of Latin America, 1930–1990," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, vol. 6, part 1, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 329. Current figures come from the World Bank website. While these statistics do not reveal the composition of this labor (that is, waged versus subsistence-based), we can safely assume

that high percentages reflect the presence of a sizable subsistence sector, while dramatically lower ones reflect a greater concentration of wage labor.

26 “They Have Given Us the Land” was first published in 1945; “Because We’re So Poor” in 1947; “Paso del Norte” in 1950. “Luvina,” published for the first time in *The Burning Plain*, was reportedly written between late 1952 and early 1953.

27 Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, trans. Douglas J. Weatherford (Grove Press, 2023), 3–4. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically. The fictional placename “Comala” references the *comal*, the clay griddle used to cook tortillas.

28 Quoted in Harss, *Los nuestros*, 303, my translation.

29 For an overview on this debate, see Gerardo Otero, *Farewell to the Peasantry?: Political Class Formation in Rural Mexico* (Westview Press, 1999).

30 Bartra, *Agrarian Structures*, 24.

31 Ericka Beckman, “Unfinished Transitions: The Dialectics of Rural Modernization in Latin American Fiction,” *Modernism/modernity* 23, no. 4 (November 2016): 813–32.

32 Ernest Feder, “Regeneration and Degeneration of the Peasants: Three Views About the Destruction of the Countryside,” *Social Scientist* 7, no. 7 (1979): 14.

33 Jean Franco, “Journey to the Land of the Dead: Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*,” in *Critical Passions: Selected Essays*, ed. Mary Louise Pratt and Kathleen Newman (Duke University Press, 1999), 429–46.

34 In a twist that demonstrates the seismic shifts in political conditions of possibility in the 1990s, the descampesinista Roger Bartra (who had long given up his Marxist commitments) joined forces with a leading campesinista, Arturo Warman, to help privatize the ejido during the Carlos Salinas administration. See June Nash, *Mayan Visions: The Quest for Autonomy in an Age of Globalization* (Routledge, 2001), 81.

35 Maurice Zeitlin and Richard Earl Ratcliff, *Landlords and Capitalists: The Dominant Class of Chile* (Princeton University Press, 1988).

36 Cristóbal Kay, “Chile’s Neoliberal Agrarian Transformation and the Peasantry,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 2, no. 4 (October 2002): 466–7.

37 José Bengoa, *Historia social de la agricultura chilena* (Ediciones Sur, 1988), 7.

38 José Donoso, *Hell Has No Limits*, trans. Suzanne Jill Levine (Green Integer Books, 1999), 39. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically.

39 As José Bengoa notes, the late nineteenth-century wheat cycle “consolidated landowner power and the hacienda as the key agrarian institution,” *Historia social*, 209, my translation.

40 Ibid., 270.

41 Patrick Barr-Melej, *Reforming Chile: Cultural Politics, Nationalism, and the Rise of the Middle Class* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 131.

42 Cerda, *El problema agrario*, 1929.

43 Gabriel Mistral, *Poema de Chile* (Editorial Pomaire, 1967), 99.

44 Javier Martínez and Alvaro Díaz, *Chile: The Great Transformation* (Brookings, UNRISD, 1996), 62.

45 Ibid., 62.

5 What Are Cities Made Of? The Boom’s Vanishing Agrarian Mediators

1 Tavid Mulder, for example, reveals how 1920s and 1930s avant-gardes discovered new modes of representing the grossly imbalanced relationship between country and city within a model of

dependent capitalism. *Modernism in the Peripheral Metropolis* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

2 On the figure of the literary superstar, see Jean Franco, "Narrator, Author, Superstar: Latin American Narrative in the Age of Mass Culture," in *Critical Passions: Selected Essays*, ed. Mary Louise Pratt and Kathleen Newman (Duke University Press, 1999). For an analysis of the boom's complicated relationship to the Cuban Revolution, socialism, and Third World nationalism, see Neil Larsen, *Reading North by South: On Latin American Literature, Culture and Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

3 Fredric Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," *Social Text*, no. 9/10 (1984): 185–6.

4 Alain de Janvry, *The Agrarian Question and Reformism in Latin America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 260.

5 In a related vein, we can note that the Cuban Revolution of 1959, though waged in the countryside, was not a mass agrarian revolt like the Mexican Revolution that preceded it. Instead, it was won by the guerrilla tactics of a small vanguard group known as a *foco*. This model, which extended to cities and countrysides across Latin America in the 1960s, could never replicate the success it had enjoyed in Cuba and generally resulted in failure; this is emblematized by the execution of Che Guevara by Bolivian state forces, aided by CIA advisors, in 1967.

6 Elena Garro's *Los recuerdos del porvenir* (*Memories of the Future*, 1963), which had a clear influence on García Márquez, employs a similarly unified narrative perspective, this time by way of the inhabitants of a small town in Mexico, Ixtepec, during the Cristero War.

7 Mario Vargas Llosa's *Conversación en la Catedral* (*Conversation in the Cathedral*, 1969), a key novel of the boom, might also be examined along these lines. Like the trio of novels studied here, it is also set in an urban center, Lima, that has been radically transformed by recent rural migration. Likewise, its form also combines high modernist fragmentation with historical totalization (in this case, the Odría dictatorship in 1950s Peru).

8 José Donoso, *Historia personal del "boom"* (Seix Barral, 1983), 56. This adhesion to the Cuban Revolution would wane after the imprisonment of the poet Heberto Padilla in 1971. Fuentes himself, in subsequent years, would display increasing liberal and even right-wing tendencies, heralding, for example, the arrival of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) under the neoliberal Salinas administration in the 1990s. See Adam Morton, "The Social Function of Carlos Fuentes: A Critical Intellectual or in the 'Shadow of the State'?," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 22, no. 1 (2003): 45.

9 Quoted in Hernán Vidal, *Literatura hispanoamericana e ideología liberal: surgimiento y crisis, una problemática sobre la dependencia en torno a la narrativa del boom* (Hispamérica, 1976), 83, my translation.

10 Carlos Fuentes, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* (J. Mortiz, 1969), 14, my translation.

11 Fuentes grew up as the son of a Mexican diplomat in outposts across the world, including Panama, Chile, and the US; he didn't live in Mexico until after the age of sixteen. For an analysis of Fuentes's class background, and ambiguous relationship to revolution in Mexico, see Morton, "Social Function."

12 Paul Stasi, *The Persistence of Realism in Modernist Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

13 Elena Poniatowska, "Carlos Fuentes, Fighting the Good Fight," *PMLA* 128, no. 3 (2013): 715.

14 Carlos Fuentes, *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, trans. Alfred MacAdam (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 15–16. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically.

15 Pavel Andrade, "Capitalist Thresholds: *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* and the Mapmaking of Modern Mexico," *Symposium* 76, no. 3 (2022): 134.

16 Fuentes, *Nueva novela*, 15.

17 Donald Shaw, "Narrative Arrangement in La Muerte De Artemio Cruz," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 15, no. 2 (1979): 132.

18 While the other leader of the Constitutionalist army, Venustiano Carranza, was a large landowner from Coahuila, Obregón hailed from a Sonoran petty bourgeois milieu that would decisively shape the post-revolution Mexican state under the leadership of Plutarco Elías Calles and, subsequently, the string of presidents comprising the period known as the Maximato.

19 Beverly Best stresses this automaticity in *The Automatic Fetish: The Law of Value in Marx's Capital* (Verso, 2024).

20 José Donoso, *The Obscene Bird of Night*, trans. Megan McDowell (New Directions, 2024), 19. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically.

21 A poststructruralist account is provided by Sharon Magnarelli, *Understanding José Donoso* (University of South Carolina Press, 1993), and a subaltern approach by Ana María Dopico in "Imbunches and Other Monsters: Enemy Legends and Underground Histories in José Donoso and Catalina Parra," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies: Travesía* 10, no. 3 (2001): 325–51.

22 José Bengoa, *Historia social de la agricultura chilena* (Ediciones Sur, 1988), 7.

23 Hernán Vidal, *José Donoso: Surrealisimo y rebelión de los instintos* (Aubi, 1972), 183.

24 Bengoa, *Historia social*, 7.

25 Ibid., 12.

26 Richard Godden, *Fictions of Labor: William Faulkner and the South's Long Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3.

27 The Chilean artist Catalina Parra later reinforced this connection in installations that photographed homeless people in New York City as imbunches, their wrapping in plastic bags reminiscent of the figure of Mapuche legend.

28 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Vintage, 1977), 799.

29 The classic text is José Nun, "Superpoblación relativa, ejército industrial de reserva, y masa marginal," *Revista latinoamericana de sociología del Centro de Investigaciones Sociales del Instituto Torcuato Di Tella* 5, no. 2 (1969). For an overview of debates on marginality, see Cristóbal Kay, *Latin American Theories of Development and Underdevelopment* (Routledge, 2010).

30 Antonio Cornejo Polar, "*El Obsceno pájaro de la noche*: La reversibilidad de la metáfora," in *José Donoso: La destrucción de un mundo*, ed. José Promis Ojeda (F. García Cambeiro, 1975), 110, emphasis in the original (my translation).

31 José María Arguedas, "The Novel and the Problem of Literary Expression in Peru," in *Yawar Fiesta*, trans. Frances Horning Barraclough (Waveland Press, 1985), xv.

32 José María Arguedas, "La soledad cósmica en la poesía quechua," in *Obras completas*, vol. 5 (Editorial Horizonte, 2012), 532, my translation.

33 These land seizures were carried out by the Cuzco Peasant Federation, led by the Trotskyist Hugo Blanco.

34 Nelson Manrique, "Historia de la agricultura peruana, 1930–1980," in *Compendio de historia económica V: La economía peruana entre la gran depresión y el reformismo militar, 1930–1980*, ed. Carlos Contreras Carranza (Lima, BCRP; IEP, 2014), 163.

35 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 876.

36 Arguedas's metaphorization of Chimbote as a brothel, or the sea as a vagina, is sexist to the degree that it signals a moral degradation. A parallel can be found in Arguedas's persistent identification of capitalists with homosexuality, in both *The Foxes* and his earlier novel *All the Bloodlines*.

37 *The Foxes* is marked by a similar contradiction regarding the professionalization of literature that was occurring for the first time in Latin America in the 1960s. On the one hand, Arguedas was interested in publishing an earlier version of his Chimbote novel with Seix Barral, the Spanish publishing house that transformed Latin American novels into international bestsellers; on the other, he rejected the transformation of literature into a commodity like any other. Carlos Fuentes, he complains bitterly in his diaries, writes "like a bricklayer working on a piecework basis" (21), and as such is a negative model for the contemporary writer.

38 Alberto Moreiras, “The End of Magical Realism: José María Arguedas’s Passionate Signifier,” *Journal of Narrative Technique* 27, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 102.

39 William Rowe, “‘No hay mensajero de nada’: La modernidad andina según los *Zorros* de Arguedas,” *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 36, no. 72 (2010): 61–96.

40 Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (Verso, 1998).

41 Rowe, “Mensajero,” 80. Along similar lines, Michael Löwy has explored how figures such as Benjamin and André Breton grounded their projects in a “revolutionary Romanticism” that reanimated elements of myth and religion, not to project “a *return* to the past” (often a recipe for the most reactionary ideologies), but instead “a *detour* through the past on the way to a utopian future.” *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s* On the Concept of History (Verso, 2005) 5.

42 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 693.

43 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 783.

44 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 110.

Coda: What’s Left of the Countryside? The Twenty-First-Century Post-Agrarian Novel

1 Significantly, Del Paso’s earlier novel *José Trigo* does retain a link to the agrarian world, through a plot that weaves between contemporary railroad workers in Mexico City and an earlier episode of the Cristero War. But in *Palinuro de México*, this agrarian backstory becomes much less central to a narrative mainly focused on the capital city.

2 Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez, *McOndo* (Grijalbo Mondadori, 1996), 13, my translation.

3 See Manuel Riesco, *Desarrollo del capitalismo bajo Pinochet* (Ediciones ICAL, 1989), 70.

4 Quoted in Xóchitl Bada and Jonathan Fox, “Persistent rurality in Mexico and ‘the right to stay home,’” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 49, no. 1 (2022): 31.

5 Quoted in Farshad Araghi, “Accumulation by Displacement: Global Enclosures, Food Crisis, and the Ecological Contradictions of Capitalism,” *Review* (Fernand Braudel Center), 32, no. 1 (2009): 134.

6 Aaron Benanav, “A Global History of Unemployment: Surplus Populations in the World Economy, 1949–2010” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2014), 114.

7 Jason Moore, “The End of the Road?: Agricultural Revolutions in the Capitalist World-Ecology, 1450–2010,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 10, no. 3 (2010): 405.

8 While not concerned directly with agriculture, Emilio Sauri’s *Imperial Decay: Literature, Autonomy, and the End of Modernization in the Americas* (Northwestern University Press, forthcoming) provides a thorough examination of how the novel and other art forms periodize the present era of de-development and neoliberalism.

9 Lucía de Leone, “Campos que matan: Espacios, tiempos y narración en ‘Distancia de rescate’ de Samanta Schweblin,” *452°F* 16 (2017): 62–76.

10 Gustavo Oliveira and Susanna Hecht, “Sacred Groves, Sacrifice Zones and Soy Production: Globalization, Intensification and Neo-nature in South America,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 43, no. 2 (2016): 251–85.

11 Samanta Schweblin, *Fever Dream*, trans. Megan McDowell (Riverhead Books, 2017), 54. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically.

12 Samanta Schweblin, “Nunca, jamás, las cosas ocurren como uno las imagina,” *Página 12*, September 22, 2014.

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14 Michael Denning, “Wageless Life,” *New Left Review* 66 (November/December 2010): 79–97.

15 Robert Kurz, *O Colapso da Modernização: Da derrocada do socialismo de caserna à crise da economia mundial* (Paz e terra, 2008).

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Cover design: Everything Studio
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